ELECTRONIC SOUND

ISSUE 113

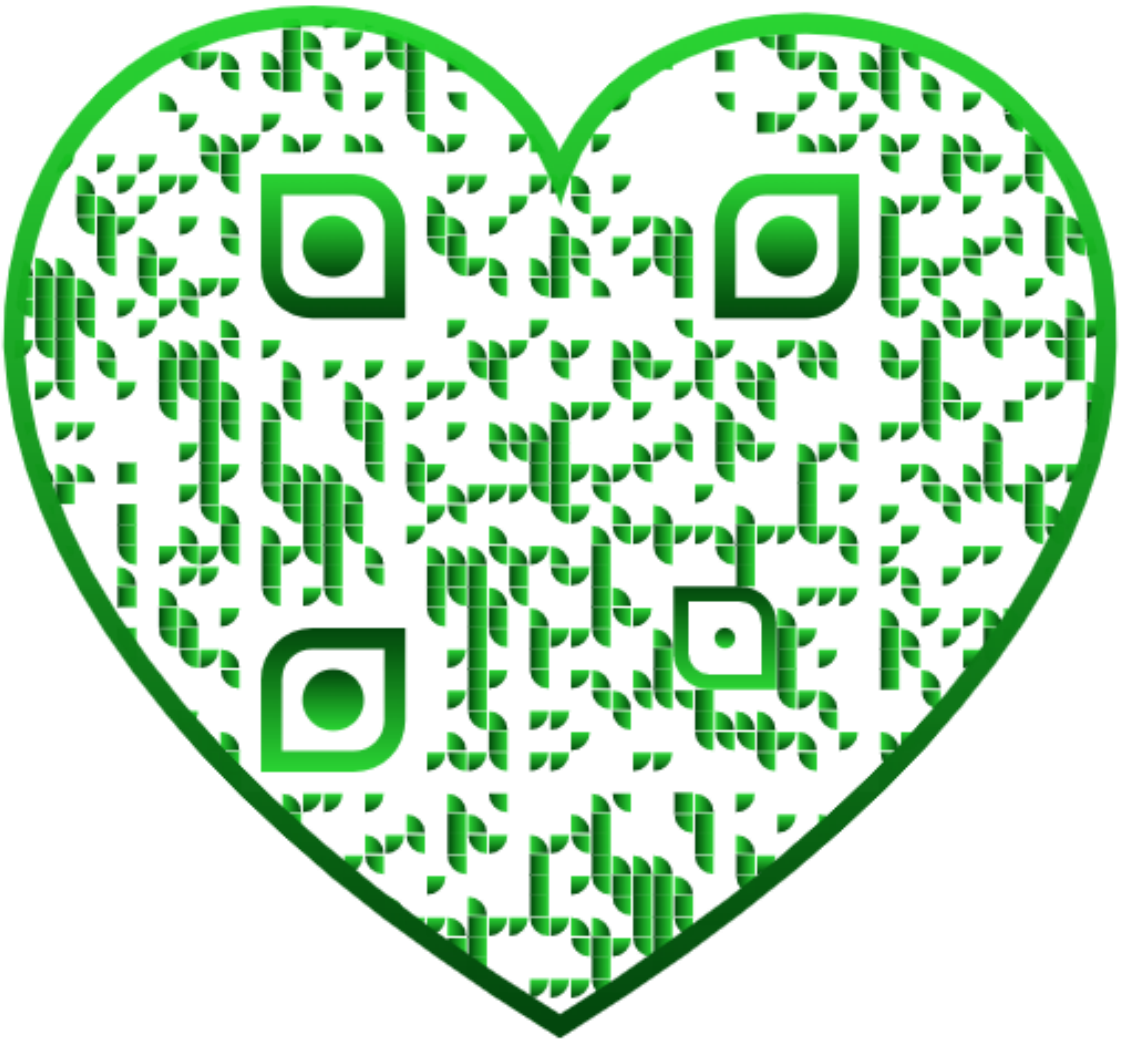
£7.99

PET SHOP BOYS

"WE STILL LIKE TO BE PROVOCATIVE!"

JANE WEAVER / WARRINGTON-RUNCORN / BARRY ADAMSON / RIDE / EDDY GRANT / FRAN & FLORA / JONNY TRUNK

TALKING SHOP



113

WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

EDITOR
Push

DEPUTY EDITOR
Mark Roland

ART EDITOR
Mark Hall

FEATURES EDITOR
Velimir Ilic

FRONT EDITOR
Isaak Lewis-Smith

REVIEWS EDITOR
Claire Francis

ARTWORKER
Joel Benjamin

SUB EDITORS
Gill Mullins
Susie Dawes

It's exactly 40 years since the Pet Shop Boys burst into our lives with the original release of 'West End Girls'. With Neil Tennant's erudite lyrics and Chris Lowe's irresistible synth hooks, it was the first in a very long line of classic PSB earworms.

This month's cover stars have always operated on their own terms. They've touched on themes of love, society, politics and literature – all delivered in Neil's trademark detached vocal style – and broadened mainstream pop in the process. They've helped to shape the development of electronic music, their inventive sleeve artwork, promo videos and stage shows adding distinct and quirky visuals into the mix. They've sold an incredible 50 million records and racked up countless hits around the world, including 22 Top 10 singles in the UK, but they have also managed to remain part of the zeitgeist. That's no mean feat, given how fast music tastes, fashions, attitudes and technologies change.

Neil Tennant will be 70 this year and Chris Lowe will be 65. There's no sign of the pair slowing down, though. They are still making music with heart, soul and a spring in their step. Take their latest album, 'Nonetheless', which is their 15th. It has that quintessential and instantly recognisable PSB sound, but it's laden with strings and the effect is warm, sensual and radiant from beginning to end. A late-career album that's definitely a keeper… now there's a rarity.

You'd think Neil and Chris would be sick of the sight of each other by now, wouldn't you? Not a bit of it. As our writer Ian Gittins quickly discovered, they still get on like a house on fire – bickering like a long-married couple, exuding an almost telepathic understanding, and demonstrating immaculate comic timing. Ian describes them as "the Morecambe and Wise of synthpop", no less, and the resulting interview is highly illuminating and hugely entertaining. They're keen to talk about their new album, of course, but they also reflect on their earlier years, the influence of David Bowie and punk rock, and ballet superstar Rudolf Nureyev, among many other topics. As Ian says, "you just wind them up and watch them go". If there's one thing you could never accuse the Pet Shop Boys of, it's being boring.

We have a stellar supporting cast to PSB too, including Jane Weaver, Barry Adamson, Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, Eddy Grant, Ride, Richard Norris, Jonny Trunk and Fran & Flora. We also speak to acclaimed journalist and author Simon Reynolds about his latest book, 'Futuromania: Electronic Dreams, Desiring Machines And Tomorrow's Music Today', which explores how electronic music can "stir anticipation for a thrillingly transformed world just around the corner".

As mission statements go, that's definitely one we can get on board with.

Electronically yours,
Push and Velimir

EDITORIAL
editorial@electronicsound.co.uk

ADVERTISING
Chris Dawes
chris@electronicsound.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS
electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe
support@electronicsound.co.uk

PUBLISHED BY
Pam Communications Limited

Studio 20, Capitol House,
Heigham Street, Norwich, NR2 4TE

electronicsound.co.uk
facebook.com/electronicmagazine
twitter.com/electronicmaguk

CONTRIBUTORS
Jeremy Allen, Joe Banks, Imogen Bebb, Ian Berriman, Scott Blixen, Claire Carroll, Paul Clarke, Joe Clay, Bethan Cole, Stephen Dalton, Bob Fischer, Ben Gilbert, Ian Gittins, Carl Griffin, Robert Harris, Jo Hutton, Martin James, Jo Kendall, Andy Linehan, Neil Mason, Finlay Milligan, Ben Murphy, Kris Needs, Sharon O'Connell, Matt Parker, David Pollock, Chris Roberts, Fat Roland, Will Salmon, Joe Silva, Dave Simpson, Will Simpson, Mat Smith, Anton Spice, William Stokes, David Stubbs, James Thornhill, Anthony Thornton, Neil Thomson, Spenser Tomson, Oli Warwick, Ben Willmott, Jonathan Wright

© Electronic Sound 2024. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced in any way without the prior written consent of the publisher. We may occasionally use material we believe has been placed in the public domain. Sometimes it is not possible to identify and contact the copyright holder. If you claim ownership of something published by us, we will be happy to make the correct acknowledgement. All information is believed to be correct at the time of publication and we cannot accept responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies there may be in that information.

Type set in Univers.

Printed on paper that originated from managed forests, recycled paper or a combination of both.

Pam

Low Carbon Innovation Fund

MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C017177

THE EYSTUROY TUNNEL

Faroe Islands

MAY 2024

INTERVIEW: JEREMY ALLEN

"The Eysturoy Tunnel – or Eysturoyartunnilin – opened on the Faroe Islands in 2020," says Faroese musician Jens L Thomsen. "It's a three-branch, 11 kilometre-long tunnel with a roundabout at its centre – the only subsea roundabout in the world. Where it used to take me an hour to drive from my home to Tórshavn, the capital, it now takes 15 minutes. These subsea tunnels drilled through the basalt are springing up all over the islands, and ordinarily, people are invited to enter on the day they open without any traffic.

"I was commissioned to compose a soundscape for it. At first, I hoped to play it throughout the entire tunnel network, but I realised that you'd have to put speakers up everywhere, which would be impossible. Then I remembered they have copper wire for the radio running through, and when I called up to suggest it, luckily they had one left!

"The track I made – 'ÆÐR', meaning 'Vein' – is eight minutes long, which is the time it takes to traverse the tunnel by car, and it broadcasts on FM radio continuously, meaning you can always tune in.

"As a musician, I've always used the resources around me. I made all of the instruments for my band ORKA from things found on my father's farm, and then I became more interested in my environment, using the whole country as a studio, recording seismic background noise with geophones.

"We have a very strong singing culture on the isles – it wasn't until 100 years ago that the first instrument came to the Faroes. The whole basis of what we do started with chain dancing and microtonal psalm singing. Every year, 20,000 people actually have a chain dance for the national holiday, and it's completely nuts. Imagine 90-verse Viking sagas being chanted by 20,000 people! It's ridiculous…

"My objective was to give the tunnel a voice. If I created the voice, Tróndur Patursson – the famous Faroese sculptor and painter – created its heart, with the steel dancing figures that surround what's become known as the 'jellyfish roundabout'.

"To make the track, I used chance operation to control the pitch and put the samples through a band-pass EQ, so every note triggers a very small spectrum of the sound, taken from men digging and drilling.

"There's a theme of moving forwards, and the sounds work in tandem with the lights as you pass through the tunnel. Still, I wanted to reduce the tempo somehow – everything is always faster, faster, faster – and I wanted to do something that actually slows us down.

"You'll notice a crackle from the signal as you pass through the tunnel. At first I tried to get them to remove it, but later I started reading Mark Fisher's 'Ghosts Of My Life', and there's a passage about how noise creates cracks in late capitalism. After that, I became contented with this ghost in the machine. Not everything adds up, which is why there's an augmented fifth that creates dissonance in the final passage.

"I've used the tunnel every day since it opened, and I always tune in."

The vinyl release of 'ÆÐR' is out now on Kervið

READER OFFER

Exclusive reader-only limited editions

HOW DO I GET THE ELECTRONIC SOUND READER OFFER?

A. Buy the latest issue and the Reader Offer directly from electronicsound.co.uk/shop as a Magazine & Music Bundle for £13.99

B. Take out our Bundle Subscription to get the magazine and the Reader Offer every month for just £12.99. See electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe for details

C. Visit electronicsound.co.uk/petshopboys to buy this release on its own for £8.99, but be quick because stocks are strictly limited

Pet Shop Boys
‘Love Comes Quickly’ (live)
‘Paninaro’ / ’Always On My Mind’ (live)
Gold vinyl seven-inch

Our latest Reader Offer is an exclusive **Pet Shop Boys** seven-inch pressed on gold vinyl and featuring live versions of three of their biggest tracks

The tracks on this month’s Electronic Sound seven-inch are taken from Pet Shop Boys’ ‘Dreamworld: The Greatest Hits Live’ film, which premiered in selected cinemas for two nights in January and will be released on Blu-ray this summer. The footage was captured at the Royal Arena in Copenhagen in July 2023 and the music for the show was produced by Stuart Price, who started working with the band in 2012.

The A-side of the record is the gloriously slinky ‘Love Comes Quickly’, a song which was originally released as a single in 1986. It was Pet Shop Boys’ follow-up to ‘West End Girls’, their mega-selling worldwide hit, but it stalled at Number 19 in the UK chart.

“Were we disappointed about that?” ponders PSB frontman Neil Tennant. “We’re still disappointed about it! I think it’s a fantastic record. Oddly enough, I’ve recently seen Noel Gallagher and Johnny Marr being asked which song they wished they had written, and they both chose ‘Love Comes Quickly’. Johnny said it’s one of his favourite songs ever.”

A major talking point of ‘Love Comes Quickly’ in 1986 was the promo video, which was shot – in very blurry monochrome – by the late Eric Watson.

“Eric worked with me when I was at Smash Hits [as the assistant editor] and he did a lot of the early Pet Shop Boys photo and video shoots,” says Neil. “He later called the video ‘a complete disaster’, but I think that’s a little harsh. Something in the movement of it is very pleasing to me.”

The B-side of our seven-inch brings together ‘Paninaro’ and ‘Always On My Mind’, resulting in an epic and euphoric rush. The former was inspired by a PSB trip to Milan, during which Neil and keyboardist Chris Lowe took note of local youths known as “paninari”, who hung around sandwich bars and coffee shops in designer clothing and listened to new romantic and Italian club music.

‘Paninaro’ first appeared as a limited edition 12-inch in Italy in 1986 and was then on the flip of ‘Suburbia’. It was reissued as a single in 1995 to promote ‘Alternative’, the duo’s B-sides compilation.

“We loved the paninari kids, although not everyone did,” notes Neil. “While we were in Italy, we also met these super-hip kids who were into us and bands like New Order, and they were horrified that we were interested in the paninari scene. We just immediately loved that the whole thing was so uncool. It was a bit like how our German fans now react to us liking Schlager music.”

“We were obsessed with songs that went ‘Oh-oh-oh!’ at the time,” adds Chris. “Italy was full of songs like that.”

‘Paninaro’ segues seamlessly into ‘Always On My Mind’, a track Pet Shop Boys initially covered in 1987 for an ITV special commemorating the 10th anniversary of the death of Elvis Presley. Subsequently voted the best cover version of all-time in a public poll commissioned by the BBC, it was so well-received that PSB recorded and released it that same year.

“After we did the TV show, we were going to put ‘Always On My Mind’ on the B-side to ‘Rent’,” explains Neil. “But Jill Wall, who ran the marketing at Parlophone [and later, as Jill Carrington, managed Pet Shop Boys], said to us, ‘No! You’re mad! You should make it a single and put it out at Christmas!’. When she said that, we quite liked the idea. And it went to Number One.”

THE FRONT

3 Welcome

4 Opening Shot

6 Reader Offer

11 Robyn Errico

12 Enigmas

14 Richard Norris

18 Needs Must

19 UTO

21 Seagoth

22 Jonny Trunk

26 Banging On

27 Polevaulter

29 Gross Motor

30 Eddy Grant

FEATURES

36 Pet Shop Boys

50 Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan

56 Barry Adamson

62 Jane Weaver

66 Ride

70 Simon Reynolds

72 Fran & Flora

THE BACK

74 Wolfgang Tillmans

76 Khôra, Neu Gestalt, Seabuckthorn, Jeck Glass Dubs

77 Aili, ‘MCPM012 Session Tapes’, Boycalledcrow, Plant Vox

78 Ammonite, Synthetic Villains, Moderna, Soft Cotton County

79 Wolfgang Seidel, Kopy, Racine, Onepointwo

80 Halogenix, M Wagner, Brian D’Souza / Or:la, Beth Gibbons

81 Contours, Iglooghost, Penny Arcade, Rodion GA

82 Marucoporoporo, Vivabeat, Lola De La Mata, Carlos Giffoni

83 Dawn Chorus And The Infallible Sea, Lyli J, Shakali, Bela

84 Kee Avil, Camp, Phase4our, Mieko Shimizu

85 France Jobin, Shards, ’SIIIX Vol 1’, Walt Disco

86 Audio Obscura, HHY & The Macumbas, Conrad Schnitzler

87 Bodega, Multiples, Vicious Pink

88 Fat White Family, Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, Arab Strap

89 Broadcast, Plant Vox

90 Anne Clark, Keeley Forsyth

91 Low End Activist, DJ Absolutely Shit, Self Modifier

92 RNA Organism, Sun Ra, Jeff Mills

93 Transmission Towers, No Type

94 NikNak

95 The Balloonist, Die Partei, Sons Of Ken

96 Yu Ching, Barry Adamson, Abul Mogard & Rafael Anton Irisarri

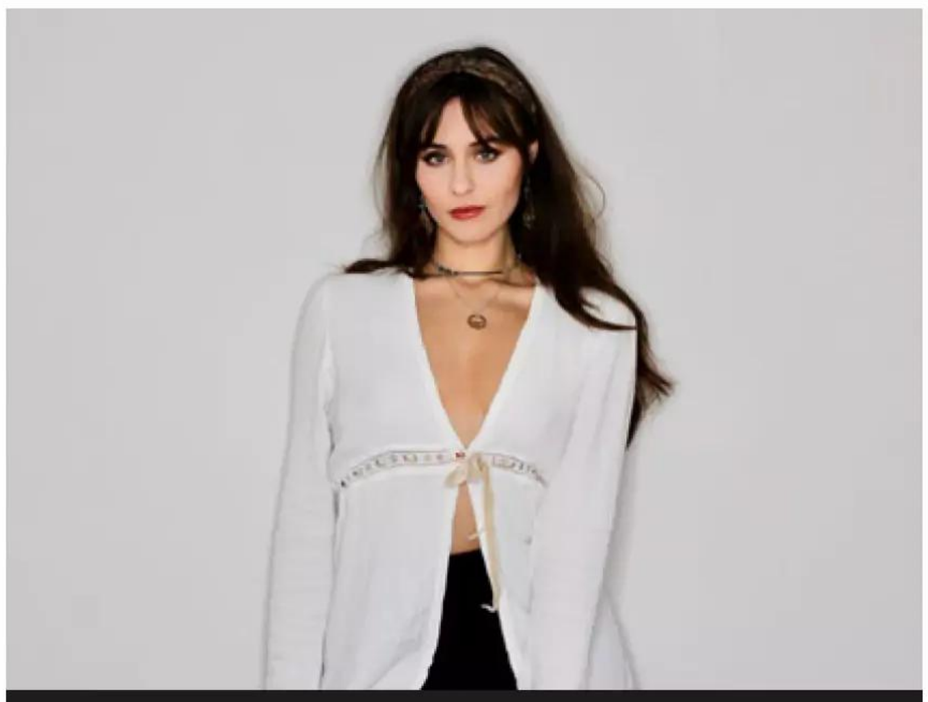
97 Normil Hawaiians, Wave Arising

98 Brief Encounters

BOOM FOR YOUR BUCK

Deluxe speakers top wish list

For their new range of loudspeakers, the Theia, Rhea and Asteria, Swiss hi-fi manufacturers Goldmund have apparently taken inspiration from the Daleks. And we're not complaining. These beauties follow in the footsteps of the audiophiles' Gaia speakers, and pack a punch thanks to all the gubbins they're loaded with, while incorporating Goldmund's "proprietary Proteus LS and Leonardo Time Correction technologies for enhanced performance". Snazzy. Prices start at £89,000. We thought we'd save that bit for last. **goldmund.com**



PULSE

ROBYN ERRICO

North-east vocalist joins Dubstar vet

WHO?

Arguably Darlington's finest purveyor of fantasy-influenced psychedelic folktronica. Her excellent debut EP 'Back To The Mud' takes its name from a phrase in Joe Abercrombie's best-selling book trilogy, 'The First Law'. "It has a warrior society called the Northmen," explains Robyn. "Being northern, perhaps I took a particular liking to them despite their savageness. They have a phrase for dying – 'going back to the mud'. I liked the gritty honesty and the circularity of it, the idea of going back to the earth rather than leaving it sounds natural yet brutal."

WHY ROBYN ERRICO?

Listen to the likes of 'Sycamore Tree' or 'Lightless, The Stars'. She's got a voice that, quite frankly, might send shivers down the spine of longstanding Kate Bush fans. "It's extremely flattering that she's almost always mentioned in reference to my music," says Robyn. "Truthfully, I'm not overly familiar with much of her work, although 'Wuthering Heights' has always been a favourite! I grew up listening to Radiohead, Tori Amos, Jeff Buckley, Damien Rice, Alanis Morissette and Pink Floyd. I'm also very inspired by classical music and film scores, as I really appreciate the way that music accompanies stories to create a certain atmosphere."

TELL US MORE...

The EP has been slickly produced by fellow Monte Darlo resident Graeme Robinson, one-time Dubstar manager and north-east drum maestro. "I met Graeme through my mum, who knew him back in the 1980s and 90s," says Robyn. "Working with him has been great, and I feel like we really trust one another's judgement. Plus, I have so much respect for him as a drummer – the tracks just wouldn't kick the same without him!"

BOB FISCHER

'Back To The Mud' is out now on Circulation

ENIGMAS

Sweeping the world's forgotten corridors of music, **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on the Florence club and label **Xenon**

The Manifesto of Futurism was published in Italy in 1909. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Discoteca Xenon Firenze's future-facing sound zapped Italian clubgoers into the Space Age.

As resident disc-spinner at Xenon, Marzio Dance (Marzio Mugnaioni to his parents) came upon the opportunistic and inspired ploy of strapping the name of his club onto a brace of singles. Although 'The Adventure' – released in 1982 – was credited to him alone, it bore all the hallmarks of a Xenon production, albeit at a narcotically slo-mo tempo.

In 1983, it surely felt like the future had arrived. While Break Machine and Rock Steady Crew were body-poppin' up the charts, synthpop and electro-disco synergised on new wave New York dancefloors. Into this maelstrom of electronic optimism strode Dance the producer with 'Galaxi', the first single to credit Xenon as an artist in its own right. Voiced by robots, this cosmic record is a vehicle of irrepressible and ecstatic exuberance.

It may be a personal peccadillo, but the merest whiff of vocoder on an Italo-disco 12-inch gets my heart racing like a hardcore clubber on poppers, and by the early 80s, the bright, brittle aesthetic of the genre was supercharged by the arrival of affordable technology. Despite its cheap 'n' cheerful, cut and paste patina (it blatantly cops a feel of the 'Billie Jean' synth riff), 'Galaxi' propels itself towards interplanetary profundity. With the addition of slinky electric guitars, it's a missing link between the electronic prog of Sensations' Fix and the arms-aloft hedonism of Black Box's 'Ride On Time'.

Perhaps sensing this blueprint release might wrong-foot dancers, Dance upped the ante (and bpm) on successive Xenon records, making each more baroque than the last. Indeed, as the 1980s got glitzier, he was only too happy to ramp up the bombastic flavouring of his confections. 1984's 'Symphony' borrowed one-note bass menace from Frankie's 'Relax' and trowelled on an orchestra of synthesised strings. 'Xenon Opera', from the following year, gets high on its own supply of Rondò Veneziano renaissance references and blows its load in a flood of chintzy, sticky-sweet excess.

'Galaxi' is a single I yearned for long before I heard it, made when Xenon productions still cleaved closely to electro. While the later records may offer just too much of everything to be tasteful, they answered the prayers of nightlife tifosi. At the dawn of the 80s, while disco flatlined elsewhere, Italy carried the torch.

MY SUPER SWEET 16-BIT

Synth channels Sega vibes

The Liven Mega Synthesis from Tokyo's Sonicware is a glowing tribute to the sounds of that late 1980s gaming powerhouse, the Sega Mega Drive. Powered by the iconic YM2612 chip used in the original console, this new device harks back to the unmistakable sound of the "golden" 16-bit era, with a six-track sequencer and 10 onboard effects to boot. Best of all, it comes with sound banks and patterns specially designed by none other than Yuzo Koshiro, composer of the game music for 'Streets Of Rage', 'Etrian Odyssey' and more. Previous runs of the £234 units have gone in a flash, so don't sleep on this. **sonicware.jp**

RADIO GA GA

Italian speaker brings the heat

Tivoli's Model Two Digital Bluetooth speaker is both eye-catching and bursting with all manner of wireless capabilities, including Wi-Fi, AirPlay 2, Chromecast and Bluetooth. It houses a 20-watt amplifier that drives its full-range speaker, and the house itself is made of genuine wood, so it goes very nicely next to your cabinet. It even has a 3.5mm aux input for wired devices, which has become less common nowadays. That will be £358 please and thank you. **tivoliaudio.eu**

MEAT BEAT MANIFESTO & MERZBOW

////EXTINCT

MEAT BEAT MANIFESTO AND MERZBOW COME TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER IN AN EXHILIRATING WHIRLWIND OF RHYTHMIC SOUND. ACROSS TWO TRACKS, JACK DANGERS' INTRICATE BREAK BEATS AND SAMPLES ARE DISSOLVED BY MASAMI AKITA'S SONIC MANIPULATIONS. CASCADING INTO WALLS OF NOISE.

INFO@COLDSPRING.CO.UK
WWW.COLDSPRING.CO.UK

A TRANSCENDENTAL JOURNEY, FOCUSING ON THE DISMANTLING OF BEAT AND STRUCTURE AND RECYCLING THE RESULT THROUGH LAYERS OF BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED NOISE AND FEEDBACK LOOPS.

YouTube
WATCH
¡FLAKKA!

VIDEO BY
JACK DANGERS:

SCAN ME

WWW.COLDSPRING.CO.UK
COLDSPRING.BANDCAMP.COM

In his new memoir, 'Strange Things Are Happening', **Richard Norris** remembers when The Grid headed to Asia and Australasia for a culture shock-inducing tour supported by Autechre

WORDS: JONATHAN WRIGHT

We live in an age of huge EDM festivals and shows, a time when it's common practice for superstar DJs to perform against a backdrop of extravagant visuals. Richard Norris, who's one half of The Grid with Dave Ball, reflects on how this was certainly not the case in 1995 when, in the wake of the previous summer's international hit, 'Swamp Thing', the duo were at the peak of their fame.

"There wasn't a roadmap for how to put on electronic dance music live," Norris says of the era.

At the time, The Grid's visual offering was heavily influenced by seeing Cabaret Voltaire and 23 Skidoo live and was initially built upon "20 TVs that I bought on Portobello Road in London for 25 quid each and painted black". These weren't skinny flatscreens, Norris says, but "massive old tellies" that were liable to conk out during shows, so that "at any venue, one or two were left behind".

As The Grid prepared for a short tour of Asia and Australasia, undertaken despite Ball's hatred of flying, the pair had been doing as much as anyone to invent the future of live electronic dance music.

"We had this guy we called 'The Mad Professor' [not the dub producer]," Norris remembers. "With MIDI, he worked out how we could use keyboards to fire images on the screens. Different keys would correspond to different words, so we could go 'sex' and 'drugs' on the keyboards and it would come up on the screens."

The same mad professor also "invented a pirate TV station" for The Grid.

"Within a 50-yard radius of the venues we were playing, you could tune into what we were doing onstage with video-mixing, Atari and various bits of string," Norris adds.

In travelling first to Japan, Norris and Ball were taking a very British DIY version of the future to a country that "had a real 'Blade Runner' edge" to it.

"I don't think I'd ever experienced a culture shock like that," Norris says. "At a time when the internet was still largely the preserve of geeks and new kit took a while to head west, even the technology on sale was exotic and unfamiliar. It did feel like this amazing technological fantasyland."

The first gig at Liquidroom in Tokyo was a sellout.

"They had these incredible banks of tiny blue neon lights that were going very slowly across the venue," Norris says as he remembers watching the support band, Autechre. "These futuristic analogue washes of sound were coming out, and it just seemed like the most techno thing I'd ever seen."

Alex Gifford, who played keyboards live with The Grid and would later enjoy success in Propellerheads with Will White, chose to launch his international DJ career here. He found himself under intense scrutiny.

"I vividly recall this booth with high glass around it – like a goldfish bowl," Norris says. "The crowd watched avidly as Alex was going from one record to the other, like people watching Wimbledon. They were pressed up against the booth. I don't think it was good for Alex's nerves."

Though The Grid met a few "giggling girls" who asked polite and clever questions, their audience consisted mostly of "men in suits who wanted to talk about synthesisers". Despite their staid exterior, these fans went crazy at raucous shows for which, it's probably worth noting, Norris says Sony provided the tellies.

"There was pogoing and screaming," he remembers. "Not high-pitched screaming, but mainly men shouting 'arrrggghhh!' and really going for it. It wasn't what we'd been led to expect in terms of how a Japanese audience would be. We thought they'd be a lot more subdued and calm, but they were really up for it."

As the tour continued into Singapore, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, there were unnerving aspects around experiencing a loss of individuality onstage when playing larger venues – even though these shows proved The Grid could connect with big audiences.

"For a very short period of time we became pop people, which was not really the intention," says Norris. "We'd thought of ourselves as a dance band coming from clubland and electronic music rather than being on 'Top Of The Pops' with Mariah Carey [in June 1994], which was quite a strange thing."

Too strange. Instead of embracing the pop world, The Grid went on hiatus in 1996. There would be a 14-year gap between 'Evolver', the album that included 'Swamp Thing', and the duo's fourth LP, 'Doppelgänger'. With the benefit of hindsight, when it came to taking a certain kind of acid house-influenced underground music out of the clubs and into the mainstream, The Grid were too eccentric, too punk even.

Part of the problem, perhaps, was also that 'Swamp Thing', with its banjo lines, was a track that pushed at what Norris calls the "comedy boundary". Yet once The Grid had enjoyed a huge hit, the pressure was on.

"The record company kind of implied that we needed to write an even bigger hit, and 'Swamp Thing' had reached Number Three," Norris says.

The Grid needed a surefire Number One.

"And that was quite tricky," he says.

Instead, Norris "ducked out" and "ran off to work with Joe Strummer". Yet for all that, it's clear Norris looks back on The Grid's adventures in Asia and Australasia as a high point. He actively enjoyed "being an outsider within [Japanese] culture", especially when that meant buying ambient CDs that were hard to find at home. Plus there were the laugh-out-loud moments, like the problems caused by the late banjo player Roger Dinsdale's fondness for weed.

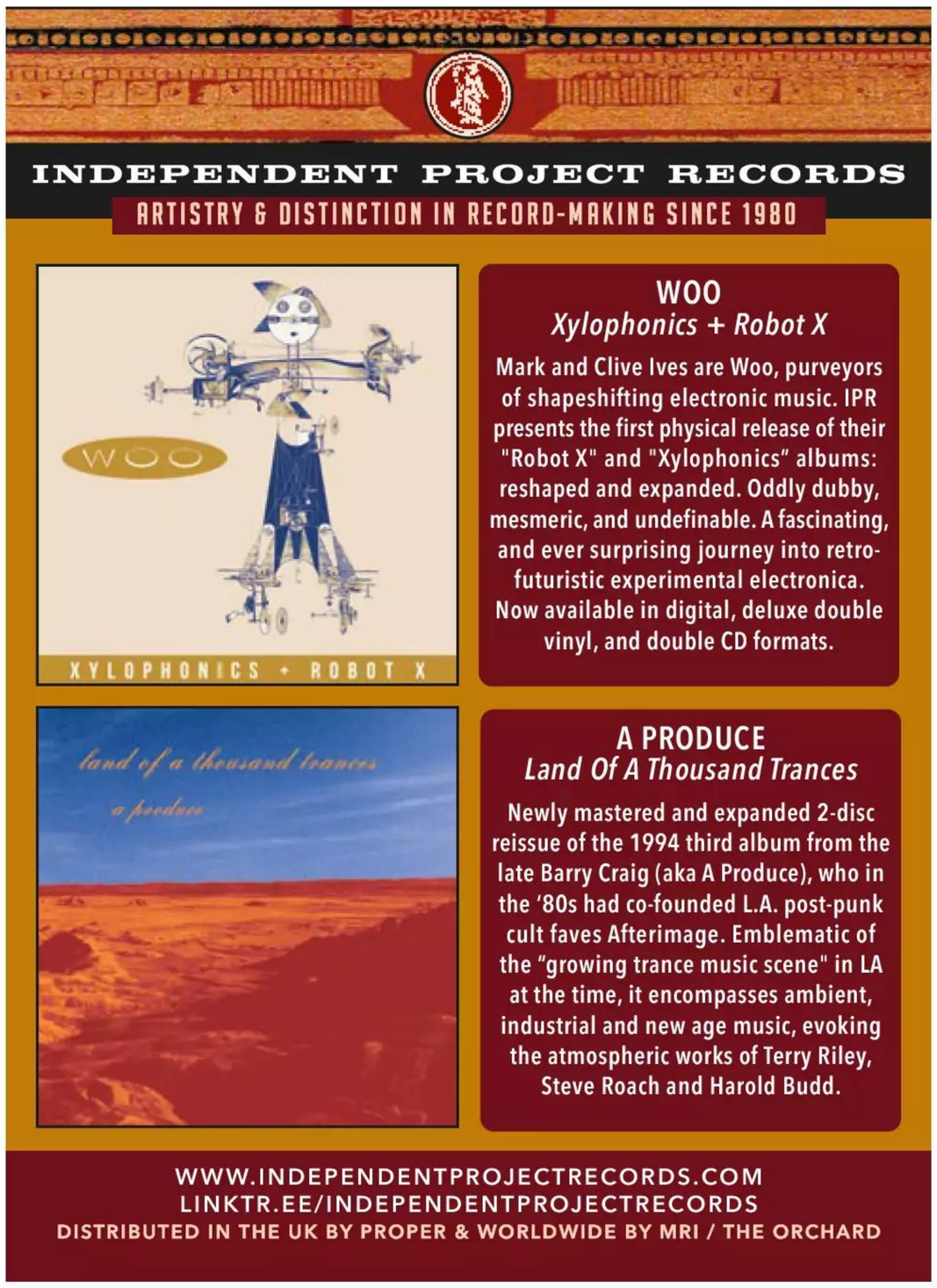
"Sniffer dogs in airports were very keen on his trousers and their very pungent smell," Norris laughs. "So yes, he was a slight liability, but he did a good banjo riff."

'Strange Things Are Happening' is out now, published by White Rabbit

LOOK AT THIS MEZZZ

Portable gadget to fall in love with

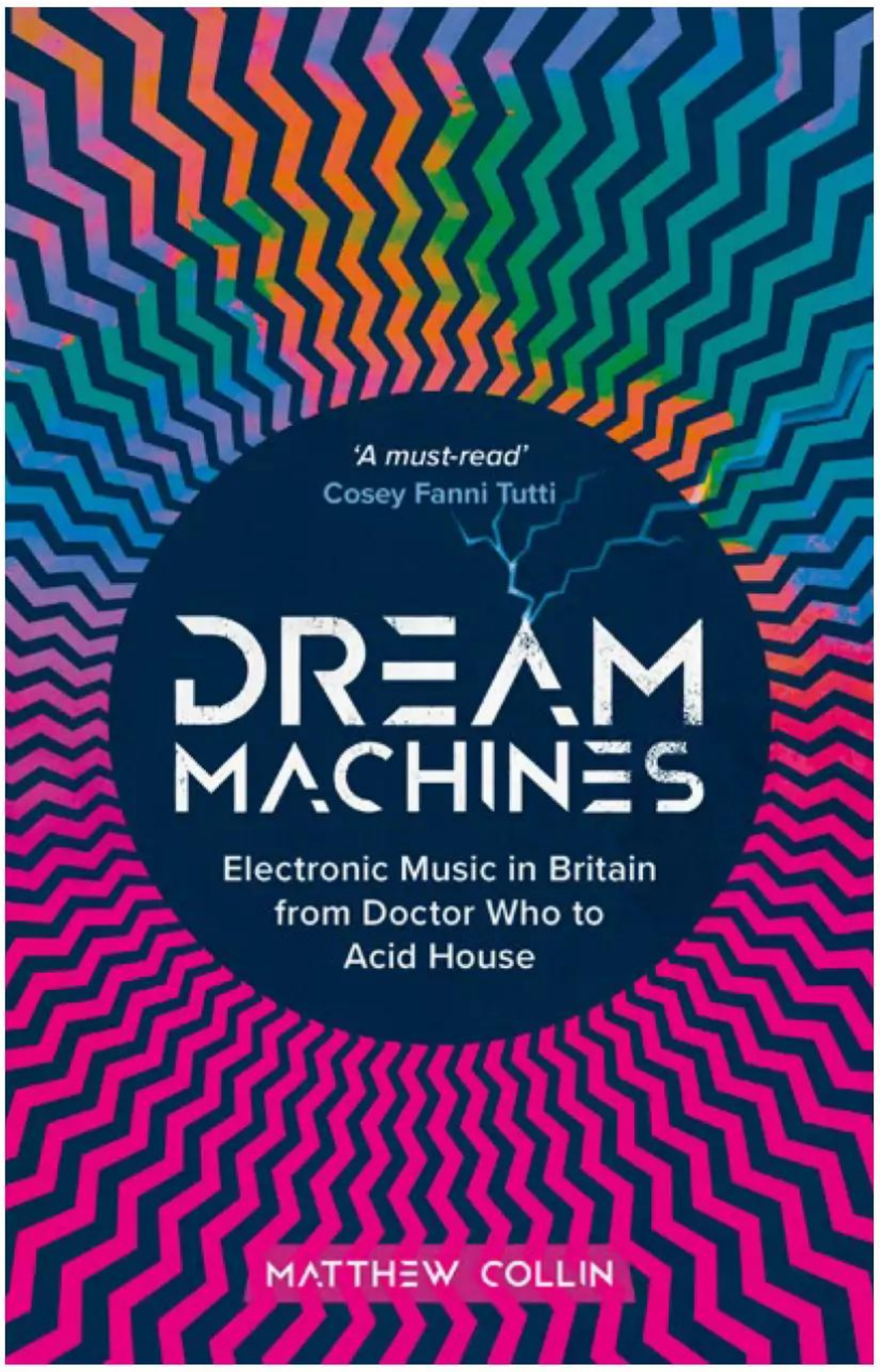
Mezzz is a handheld wireless MIDI controller and visual synth from California's Sleepy Circuits, Ron Sardarian's ostensibly one-man operation. A simple but elegant battery-powered wearable device, it features a ring of eight push-knobs around a central RBG "eye" display for showing parameters. Though specifically engineered to pair with the Sleepy VidOS 3D video synthesis app, which can create whirling, glitched-out visuals, blissful moodscapes or anything in between, with its class-compliance the Mezzz can also assume MIDI control duties for all manner of Bluetooth devices, instruments and software. That'll be £284 for as many trips as you like. **sleepycircuits.com**



DROOL BRITANNIA

Tome charts the UK's electronic history

Highly recommended reading from Matthew Collin, author of previous music titles 'Altered States' and 'Rave On', with his new book 'Dream Machines: Electronic Music In Britain From Doctor Who To Acid House', an exploration of post-Second World War avant-garde experiments from art rock to psychedelia, synthpop and beyond. It's packed to the gills with interesting interviews and aims to highlight electronic music history, and also to show how societal changes shaped technological advances in the underground movements that would inform Britain's electronic scenes for years to come. Out now for £25. **electronicsound.co.uk/shop**



SOUNDS OF THE UNIVERSE

Hear the sonics of space in new film

Sonification is the process of translating data into sounds, and for years, NASA has been taking images captured by its telescopes and transforming them into something listenable. You can witness the fascinating process in a new documentary, 'Listen To The Universe', which is available on the agency's website. Aside from the incredible visuals, the film also reveals how these sonifications are part of NASA's continuing efforts to connect with blind and visually impaired audiences. The compositions are actually pretty decent too, with digital signals and other data from supernova remnant MSH 11-52 becoming a maximalist new age soundscape titled 'Ghostly Cosmic Hand'. **plus.nasa.gov**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **Loren Connors & Mrs Bun**

In almost 10 years of doing this column, it's quite likely I've mentioned how the guitar should always be regarded as another means of creating innovative electronic breakthroughs. American primitive trailblazer John Fahey was first, exploring collages on 1967's 'Requia' and musique concrète on 1968's 'The Yellow Princess'.

Brooklyn-based iconoclast Loren Connors was the only guitarist the late Fahey held in awe, routinely deploying electronic methods to coax otherworldly textures and supernatural soundscapes from spectral vapour trails to full-bore downtown clamour. I've long-rated Connors as the world's most transcendently innovative guitarist, yet few in the UK know he exists.

Originally hailing from New Haven, Connecticut, since 1978 Connors has been releasing his abstract "Venusian blues" collections, experimenting with drones, Irish airs, avant-garde uproar or jazz terrains inspired by 1970s Miles Davis basslines – all on independent labels, probably numbering over one hundred.

As a starter, I could've picked 1990's 'Blues: The "Dark Paintings" Of Mark Rothko' or 20 other astonishing works, like his devastatingly powerful duets with Alan Licht. But for ES-friendly purposes I've gone with 2011's 'Red Mars' for its extraterrestrial wall of fire catharsis and shattering sense of total infinity, charged as always by mutating the arcane spirit of the blues. Find Loren Connors on Bandcamp – the extraordinary range of his canon is like discovering a whole new galaxy.

Literally coming back to Earth, the creative beast is stirring at our surreal new abode, including the return of 'Into The Cosmic Hutch' YouTube podcasts and a lovely little book from Nina Walsh ahead of her full-blown biography arriving later this year. 'Mrs Bun's Allotment Diaries And The Culinary Capers Of Felix & Pi' is built around columns Nina contributed to Heavenly Records' 'Caught By The River' nature website between 2011 and 2012, along with stories from the Felix & Pi mobile catering business she ran with her close friend Felix Muckart.

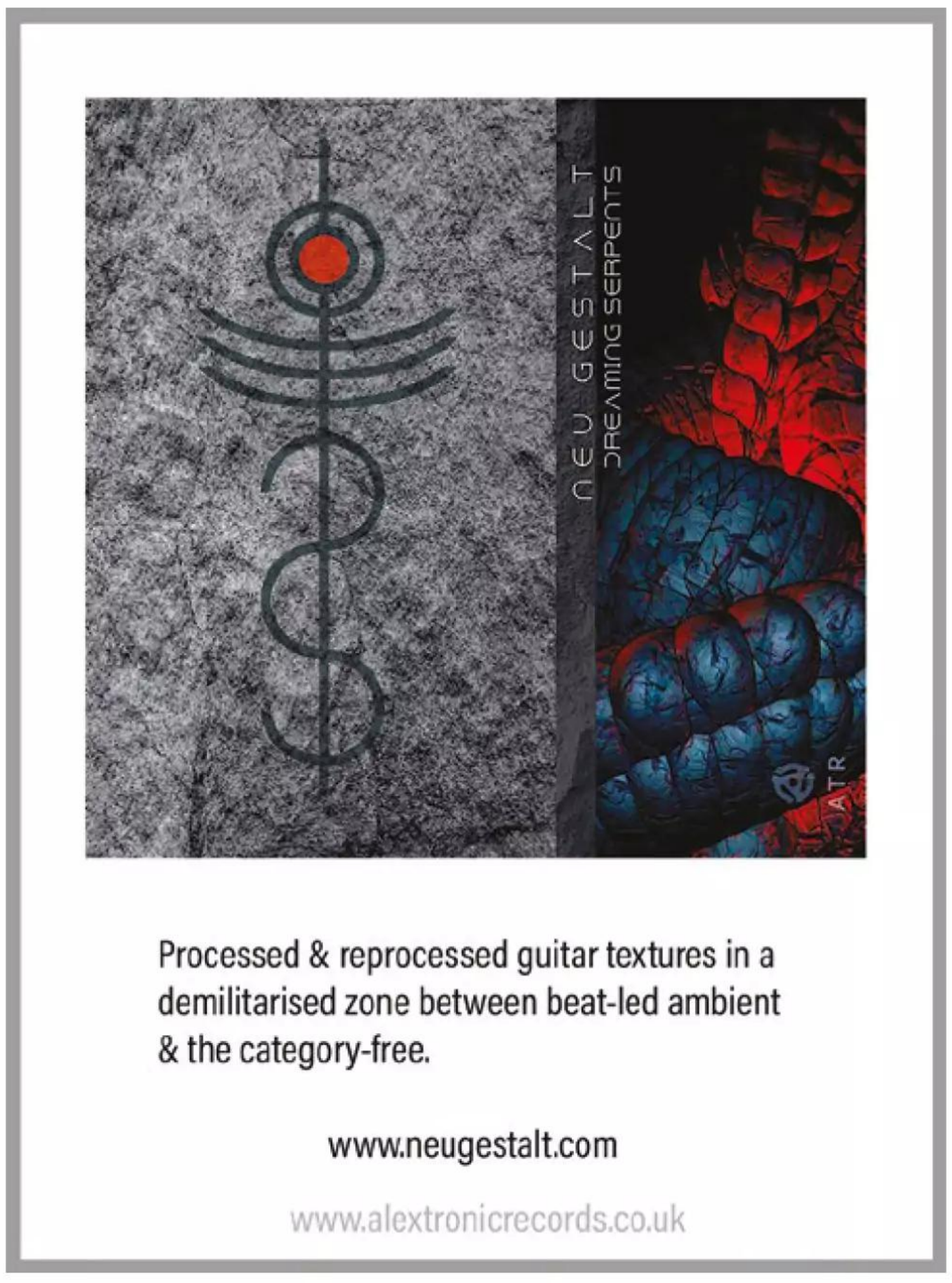
Having run the Sabres Of Paradise, Sabrettes and Emissions imprints with Andrew Weatherall through the 1990s before making her own music in the 2000s, Nina rekindled her love of gardening in 2005 when she acquired an allotment in Crystal Palace, London. From this she hooked up with the vibrant Crystal Palace music scene that inspired her to start the label Andrew named Moine Dubh.

I've written a foreword explaining this, all set against the poignant backstory of her partner Erick Legrand, who passed away in 2011. I've even taken up gardening!

WILD THING

Bear-themed Bluetooth speaker

If you're a fan of Bearbrick figurines, then you might want to give this new edition a look-in. The BE@RBRICK AUDIO 400% Portable Bluetooth Speaker (yes, that's its full name) comes with Quad 360-degree speaker technology, and is app-controlled (though you can control the volume and skip tracks by twisting its hands). Fast-charged via USB-C, you can also pair two of them for stereo listening. A throwback while being entirely modern, get one now for £595. **bearbrick.audio**



PULSE

UTO

Wonderfully weird French avant-pop

WHO?

Neysa May Barnett and Emile Larroche met on the outskirts of Paris in 2013, when Neysa became curious about the boy making beats behind the wall of their house-share. Three years later, they started creating music together as UTO, named after Neysa's dead dog. Having released a couple of EPs, their debut album 'Touch The Lock' finally arrived on InFiné in 2022. Garnering much praise, it has taken considerably less time for their second to appear, with 'When All You Want To Do Is Be The Fire Part Of Fire' released just last month (its circuitous title taken from a line in a Bill Callahan song).

WHY UTO?

'Touch The Lock' dealt in abstract ambient textures, but the follow-up delivers big beats with abundant glitchiness and insidious catchiness. Raw and heartfelt, it intriguingly examines the pair's relationship with songs which were written alone and then completed together by the fire in their home in Fontainebleau. There's still plenty of abstraction though, which is UTO's stock-in-trade.

TELL US MORE...

The motivation to analyse their own relationship through the album was due to Neysa and Emile growing tired of being asked whether they were a couple after shows. So they decided to address things head-on in their art with all the bumps in the road laid bare. It makes for an enlivening, tempestuous and sometimes uncomfortable journey where love and friction are both in abundance, harmonising with the deft, unpredictable electronica that infuses their work. 'Zombie' goes for the throat, while 'Napkin' and '2MOONS' take you to some place else entirely, where the world is melting and time moves to a different rhythm.

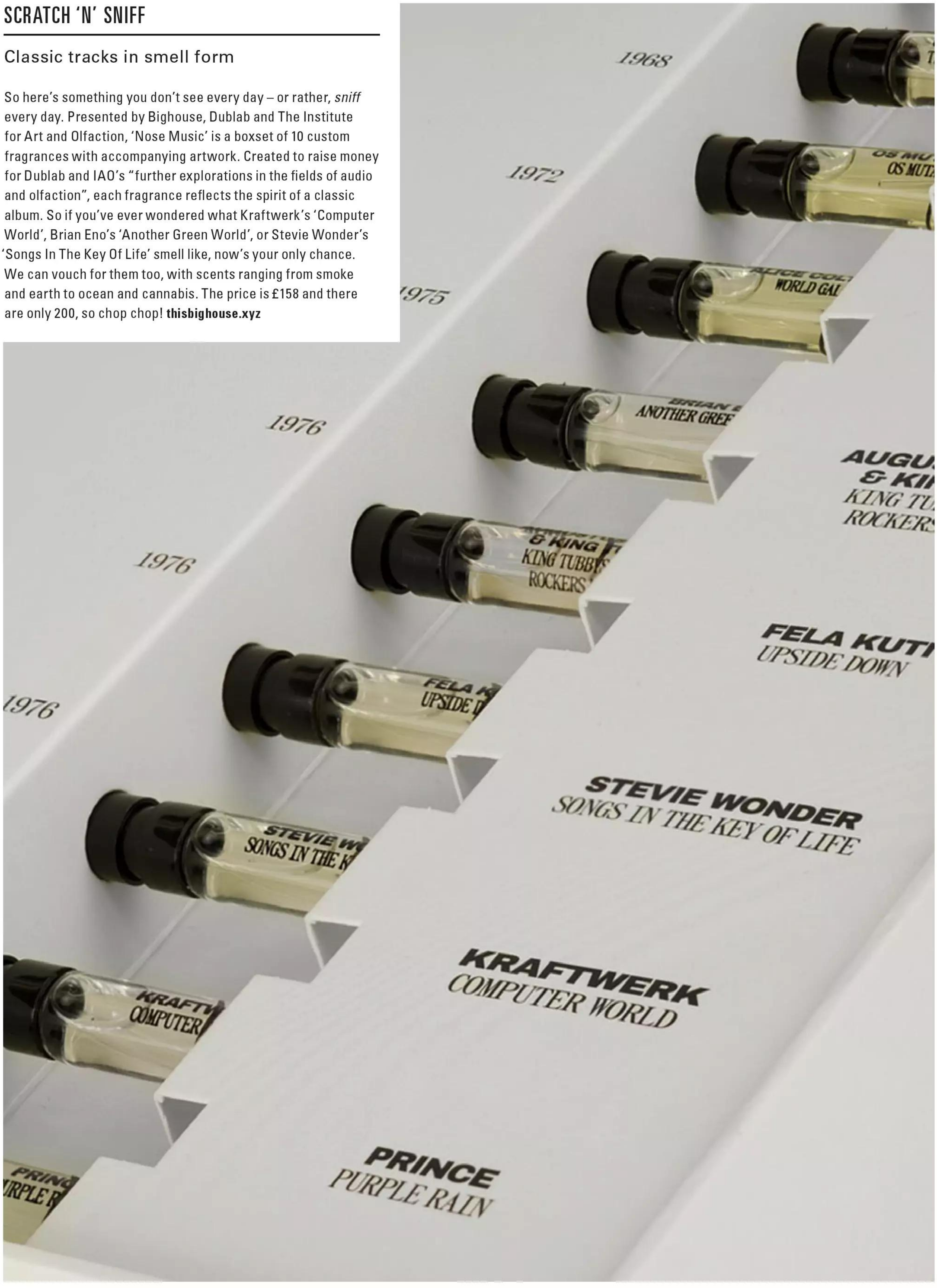
JEREMY ALLEN

'When All You Want To Do Is Be The Fire Part Of Fire' is out now on InFiné

SCRATCH ‘N’ SNIFF

Classic tracks in smell form

So here’s something you don’t see every day – or rather, *sniff* every day. Presented by Bighouse, Dublab and The Institute for Art and Olfaction, ‘Nose Music’ is a boxset of 10 custom fragrances with accompanying artwork. Created to raise money for Dublab and IAO’s “further explorations in the fields of audio and olfaction”, each fragrance reflects the spirit of a classic album. So if you’ve ever wondered what Kraftwerk’s ‘Computer World’, Brian Eno’s ‘Another Green World’, or Stevie Wonder’s ‘Songs In The Key Of Life’ smell like, now’s your only chance. We can vouch for them too, with scents ranging from smoke and earth to ocean and cannabis. The price is £158 and there are only 200, so chop chop! **thisbighouse.xyz**



GET A LOBE OF THAT

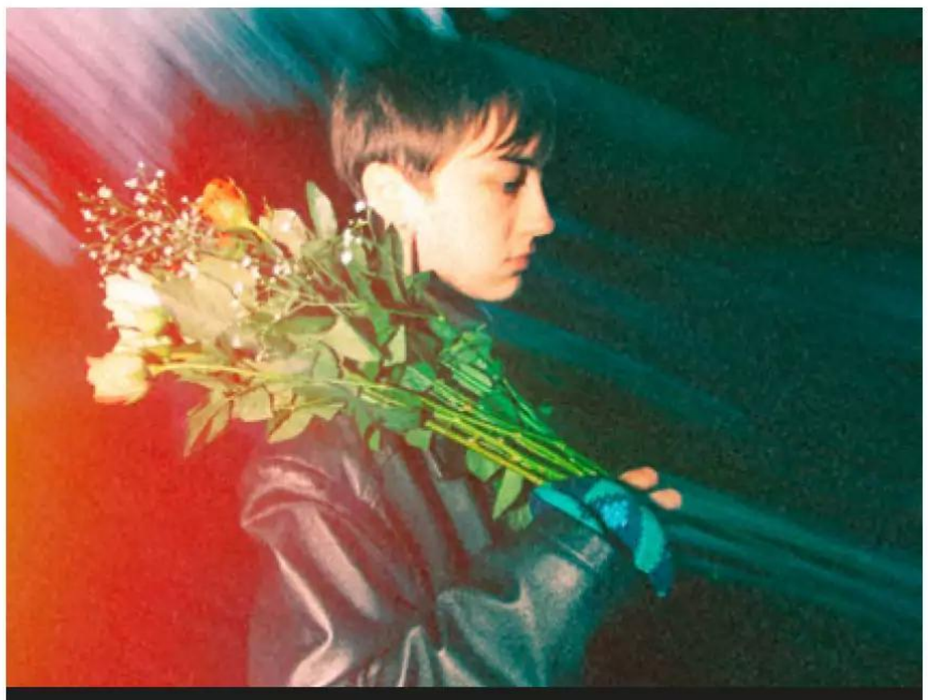
Game-changing earbuds touch down

The latest craze to hit the ever-ballooning portable audio market are open earbuds, and we're rather taken by Bose's £299 Ultra model. To use them, you don't need to create a seal as with traditional plugs. Thanks to Bose's proprietary technology, Open Audio, which effectively fires music towards your ear canal, you simply hook them around your ear. If a little finicky to put on first time around, the sound is solid and also leaves room to hear the world around you. With a decent battery life of 7.5 hours (4.5 if you're using immersive audio), there's a good reason why Bose claim they'll help you "Get your run on, flirt with a stranger, go all day and pause for nothing". Yup. All in a day's work. **bose.co.uk**

MINIMOG

Synth cat scratcher? Yes please

"Does your cat wish it was in an 80s synth pop band?" That's the question being posed by design and development company Suck UK, who have come up with the ingenious Cat Scratch Synthesiser. Featuring a keyboard made of cardboard for feline claws and a little compartment encasing a wobbly ball, it should keep your moggy entertained. Until it gets bored and wants to play with literally anything else. At which point, you can stop pretending and keep it for yourself. Better yet, it'll only cost £19.99 to start your new cat-focused tribute to The Human League. The Feline League? Why are you booing? We'll be here all week. **suck.uk.com**



PULSE

SEAGOTH

Immaculate, dreamy 90s pop nostalgia

WHO?

Liverpool's Georgia Ochoa has been steadily building a reputation since their debut 'Internet Cafe' EP in 2020, the first of several releases to find a home somewhere between ebullient dreampop and hooky synthpop. Each showcases a genuine intuition for making music with emotive depth, while solidifiying Ochoa's standing as a young up-and-coming bedroom producer. And things have since kicked on with the stunningly romantic 'How To Stay Wide Awake', Ochoa's debut album.

WHY SEAGOTH?

If you ever needed a signpost to that promised land where alternative meets mainstream, then look no further. Led by uber-catchy guitar-driven melodies, with beefy synth workouts chucked in alongside Ochoa's saintly vocals, the album is evidence of an artist fully immersed in unearthing their own unique creativity. "I started to produce some of the tracks on this album in 2019 and I was still producing them well into 2022," says Ochoa. "I'm a bit of a perfectionist, so I find it hard to know when a track is finished. Sometimes you just know, other times I'm just like, 'What can I do to make this better?'. From the yearning shoegaze-flecked indie of 'Eternity' to the nostalgic and dancier 90s drum breaks of 'Amorphous', Ochoa manages to contain an entire sonic world in these 12 tracks. Expect to hear them on a Radio 6 Music playlist coming soon.

TELL US MORE...

And you can tell Ochoa's stock is rising thanks to the esteemed company they now keep. Their debut album was mixed by Kasabian collaborator Leaf Troup, while they've solicited remixes from the likes of Ride/GLOK man Andy Bell, Mute signee Maps and Bristol's Minotaur Shock. There's no doubting more names will follow in the coming years.

ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

'How To Stay Wide Awake' is out now on Bytes

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Genial big cheese of the brilliantly esoteric Trunk Records, **Jonny Trunk**'s influences include squeaky plimsolls and pretending to be a falling leaf

INTERVIEW: BOB FISCHER

'VISION ON'

"'Vision On' started in 1965. It was a BBC programme to help deaf children be creative, with a presenter called Pat Keysell. I've spoken to people who used to make it, and they've said they were basically given a camera and told, 'This week, we're going to do a programme about zigzags – can you go out and find some zigzags for us?'.

"So they'd say, 'Yes! There are zigzags on the roof over there, and on the pavement, and outside that shop!'. Then they'd make a montage of them. And Tony Hart would create an amazing piece of artwork from empty matchboxes and tins of tuna. It was all over the place! The opening theme is a piece of groovy French music, but there would also be brass bands and improvised electronic stuff. That combination of bonkers, unexpected visuals and music definitely had a massive influence on my creative mind."

'LISTEN, MOVE & DANCE'

"I have formative memories of being five, in my school hall wearing squeaky plimsolls and a little white vest, being told to pretend I was a growing flower or a leaf falling from a tree while being played music that was often deeply peculiar. Then, when I started collecting records in the 1980s, I'd find that same music – Daphne Oram and Vera Gray LPs with 'Listen, Move & Dance' on the covers.

"It all had a very deep impact. About 15 years ago, I started my own classes in Stoke Newington playing these original electronic records while a woman gave out instructions – 'Pretend you're a kite in the wind!'.

"I think my interest in strange music all came from these early classroom experiences. Schools records, classroom projects, experimental music made by kids… fucking brilliant. I still love it. I can almost smell the school hall and see the speakers. It's gone in very deep, and it permeates everything I do."

LATE-NIGHT TELEVISION

"We had the main television at home, but we also had a little black and white portable TV that had a broken aerial which I occasionally borrowed to watch 'Match Of The Day' in my bedroom. But I also watched a series of late-night films that were massively influential. The BBC's horror double bills – I had some of the scariest nights in with those – and things like Peter Sellers in 'The Party' and The Monkees in 'Head'. My love of horror and psychedelia all came out of late-night telly.

"It was curated in a really interesting way. Streaming services now are just like old video shops – you enter Netflix or whatever, and you've got rows and rows of the same old shit! But late-night telly, in your own bedroom after your mum and dad had gone to bed on a Saturday, was almost like a weird sexual awakening. Through Hammer horror!"

LATERAL THINKING

"In 1989, I went to Watford College because it was the only place where you could learn to write adverts. I was too old and had none of the qualifications, but I think I got on the course by sheer enthusiasm, and I started looking at the golden age of advertising which, if you ask me, was the 1960s.

"Back then, you had guys like Bill Bernbach producing adverts that were really clinical and clever. But they were also lateral. So I read Edward De Bono's ideas about lateral thinking, and honestly – they're like Eno's 'Oblique Strategies'. 'Can't work out how to sell this particular pair of shoes? Chuck in something completely different and see where it takes you. A banana! Right, what can we do with shoes and bananas?' All of a sudden, another door has opened to you.

"By the end of the course, I'd learned a process of thinking that was completely lateral. It's about bringing disparate ideas together – and when it feels right, you get a little explosion in your head. Lateral thinking is one of the biggest things in my life. Loads of what I do every day comes from that kind of thought process."

VINCENT BUGLIOSI

"He was the prosecuting lawyer for The People vs Charles Manson, and his book 'Helter Skelter' is about how they pieced together the facts behind the Sharon Tate murders. It's pretty gruesome, but it's also beautifully written. He puts across the truth in such a logical and straightforward fashion.

"He wrote another book called 'Four Days In November', about the assassination of John F Kennedy. At the beginning, he basically says, 'I'm just going to tell you exactly what happened, at the exact times it all happened'. And when you read it, you realise that all the conspiracy theories are total nonsense. He obliterates them all. Lee Harvey Oswald was a crack shot from the army, he was a communist who hated JFK, and he immediately buggered off and shot somebody else! So why is there still all this stuff about the 'grassy knoll' around?

"I'm obsessed with the truth when it comes to influential things that happen in the world. And I know it's a bit weird, but I think about Vincent Bugliosi's books every day."

VINTAGE BRITISH GRAPHIC DESIGN

"When I look at the graphic work of the 1960s, especially British stuff by people like Peter J Dixon and Ken Garland, I have a massive reaction to it. We're talking abouth things like Sainsbury's own-label brands and Galt Toys.Primary colours in black and white photographs, Gill Sans fonts – all very clean, very direct and very charismatic.

"There was a Galt Toys shop where I lived in Farnham, and the graphics were so cool. They were all done by Ken Garland. I met him a few times, and he let me reproduce some of his work, which was an honour.

"There are lots of Trunk Records sleeves that are influenced by that period of 1960s design. And I've written books about graphics – including a new one, 'Audio Erotica', which is about my collection of hi-fi catalogues! And without a doubt, it's all been influenced by people like Ken. He just embodies so many of the things I've talked about today – lateral thought, simplicity and cleverness."

Jonny Trunk's book, 'Audio Erotica: Hi-Fi Brochures 1950s-1980s', is out now, published by FUEL

TOUCH OF CLASS

First ever electronic tabla

Kuljit Bhamra MBE is a British record producer and composer responsible for multiple platinum-selling records across a glittering career. He's been playing the tabla since he was six, but for the past five years, he's been working with a team of experts to develop the Tabla Touch, the world's first playable electronic tabla. Traditional tabla players won't have to change their style to play it ("It sounds like a tabla, it plays like a tabla," says Bhamra), and the hope is that it will help to make Indian drumming accessible to all. Well, anyone with £600 handy? That's the cost of Tabla Touch Studio model, which you can buy now. **keda.co.uk**

ROLL BACK THE YEARS

Denmark boutique touts game-changing gadget

The electronics gurus from Denmark's Bang & Olufsen are entering the streaming market, but not in the way you might expect. Their new wireless Beoconnect Core allows users to connect their B&O speakers (including legacy speakers that are over 30 years old) through a turntable, music system or TV for a fully cinematic, modernised experience. All you need is the little box, the bespoke app, and you're away. It's that simple, and it's even time-proofed through a replaceable Mozart streaming module, so you won't have to chuck the whole thing when you want to update it. Yours for £999. **bang-olufsen.com**

TEA TIME

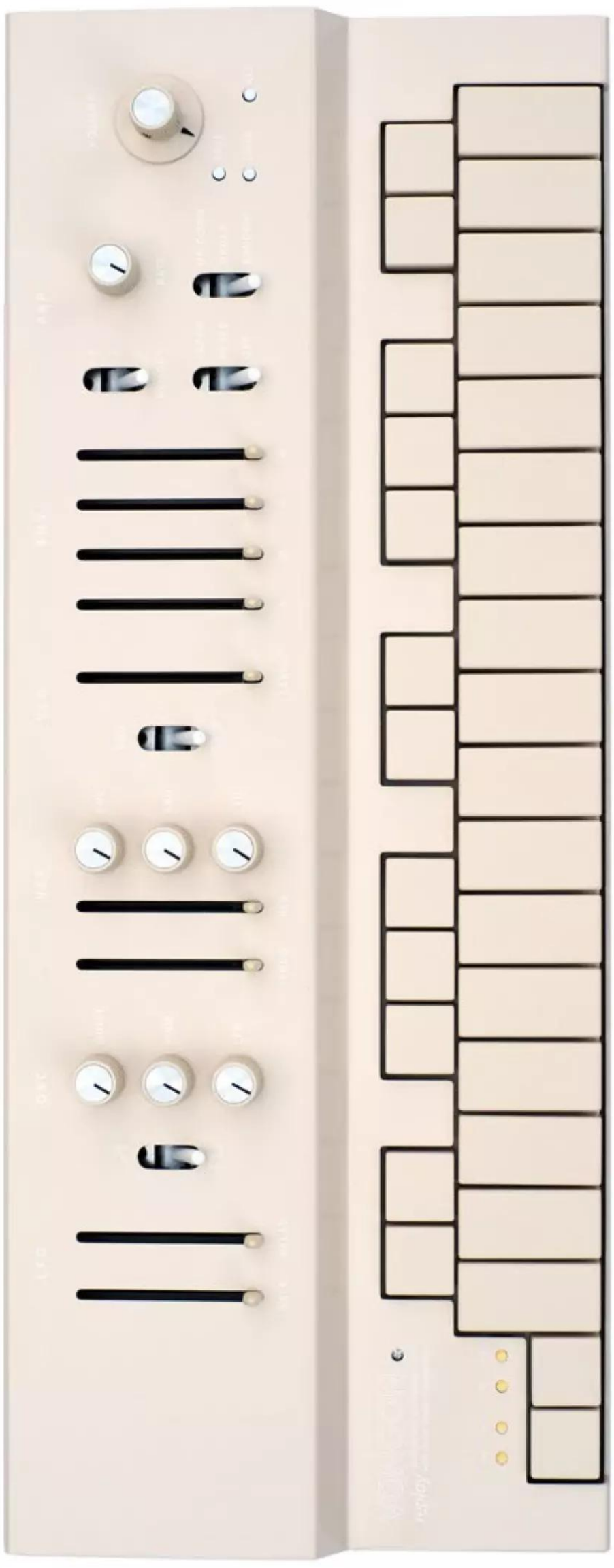
Kombucha music? Do tell more...

You're looking at a sound collaboration between Rae-Yen Song, Tommy Perman, a tea fungus and its environment. Before you start calling us bonkers, hear us out. The sculptural installation, which has been part of an exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, incorporates a pool of tea fungus connected to contact mics, a hydrophone and other sensors. Through sonic inputs – such as those caused by the movements of viewers – the fermenting tea fungus generates changing signals and audio inputs, enabling it to modulate Song and Perman's underlying work and conduct its own ever-changing multi-voice ensemble. The exhibition closes on 18 May, but you can hear the music on the compilation 'Squigoda Song Cycle ● Water~Land~Air ○'. Drink it up. **tommyperman.bandcamp.com**

OSCILLATION STATION

1980s-inspired mini polysynth

The Replay – the latest ingenious device from Ryan McGill's Vongon Electronics – is a drop-dead gorgeous compact digital polyphonic synth inspired by Japanese polysynths of the early 80s. With a six-voice virtual analogue engine at its heart, it offers masses of flexible sound sculpting, has its own web app for managing presets and accessing extended parameters, and even "hot-swap sockets" for customising its physical controls. At £700 apiece, the first batch flew off the shelves. Don't miss the second batch. **vongon.com**



BANGING ON

More random musings from **Fat Roland**. On his mind this month (as far as we can tell) is **Record Collecting**

No home is complete without a record collection. Vinyl records are shiny, groovy and they taste of liquorice. They are a cool home accessory, like sequined cushions, fridge magnets or wasp nests. I have loads of decorating tips involving records. Hammer records to your walls. See? Instant wallpaper. Pile a load of 12-inchers into a teetering stack – an acceptable chair. And Sellotape a record onto your toilet. Marvel at your new cool toilet seat. It's even got a hole for the poop to go through.

An added bonus to owning records is that you can listen to the music on them. Tons of acts have put out music on vinyl over the years. Erm… Frank Zappa. The cartoon bunny that did those 1950s mega-mixes. Bush. Although if you are going to collect records, you should do it in the correct way. I am going to dispense advice on record collecting, so pay attention. I will be charging for this advice, so please ask the Electronic Sound editors to send my bank details to you.

Theme your record collection. Nothing obvious like ordering by genre or date of release or number of trombone solos. No, you need to be more niche. Order your records according to bands named after reptiles or acts with jailed lead singers, or vinyl you found dumped behind a hedge round the back of Tesco. This is how proper purists do it.

Become a 10-inch enthusiast. Everyone and their grandad owns 12-inch records. Major yawn. And seven-inch records are old hat too – like iPods, Myspace and actual top hats. Mess with people's heads by collecting only 10-inch records. They'll take one look at your collection and think everything has shrunk – or that they've got bigger and turned into a giant. Compound their fantasy by installing a massive beanstalk in your living room. See? Now you're a proper record collector.

Record collecting is all about attitude. When discussing music tastes, if someone says they're into "anything", learn how to scoff effectively. A good scoff involves a sharp exhalation of air, as if you suddenly discover you're sucking Mick Hucknall's foot. Follow this with an arch of your shoulders, a roll of the eyes, and an aggressive projectile vomit. Then set fire to their ears. This body language sends subtle signals that you are better at music than them, and that the date is probably over even though neither of you has had dessert yet.

Next month, Electronic Sound will publish my exclusive 34-page essay on the best way to collect MP3s. I don't want to give too much away, but it will involve you owning 17 laptop computers, two functional nuclear warheads and a tuft of Jive Bunny's fur.

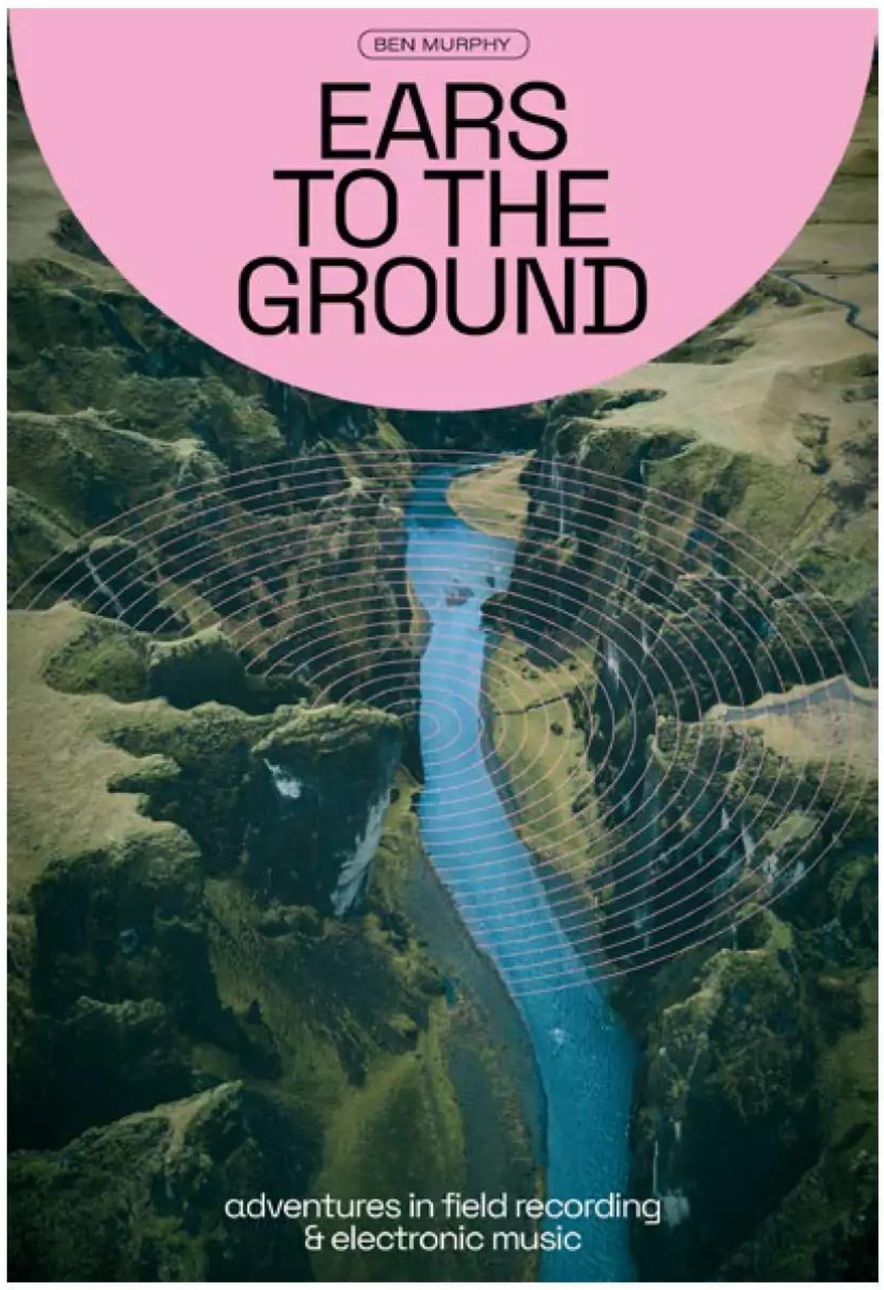
WATCH THE BIRDIE

Field recording book not to be missed

There was a time when it was vitually impossible to read an album's liner notes and not glimpse the words "field recording" somewhere. One man who paid attention to that trend is writer and Electronic Sound contributor Ben Murphy, who has pulled a blinder with his new title 'Ears To The Ground: Adventures In Field Recording'.

"What fascinated me was the variety of sound sources people were recording, and all the different reasons why," says Murphy of his decision to write the book. "It dawned on me that field recordings can be so much more than just decoration – they can be political, satirical, expressions of heritage and more, and I thought that could be the basis of a wide-ranging book."

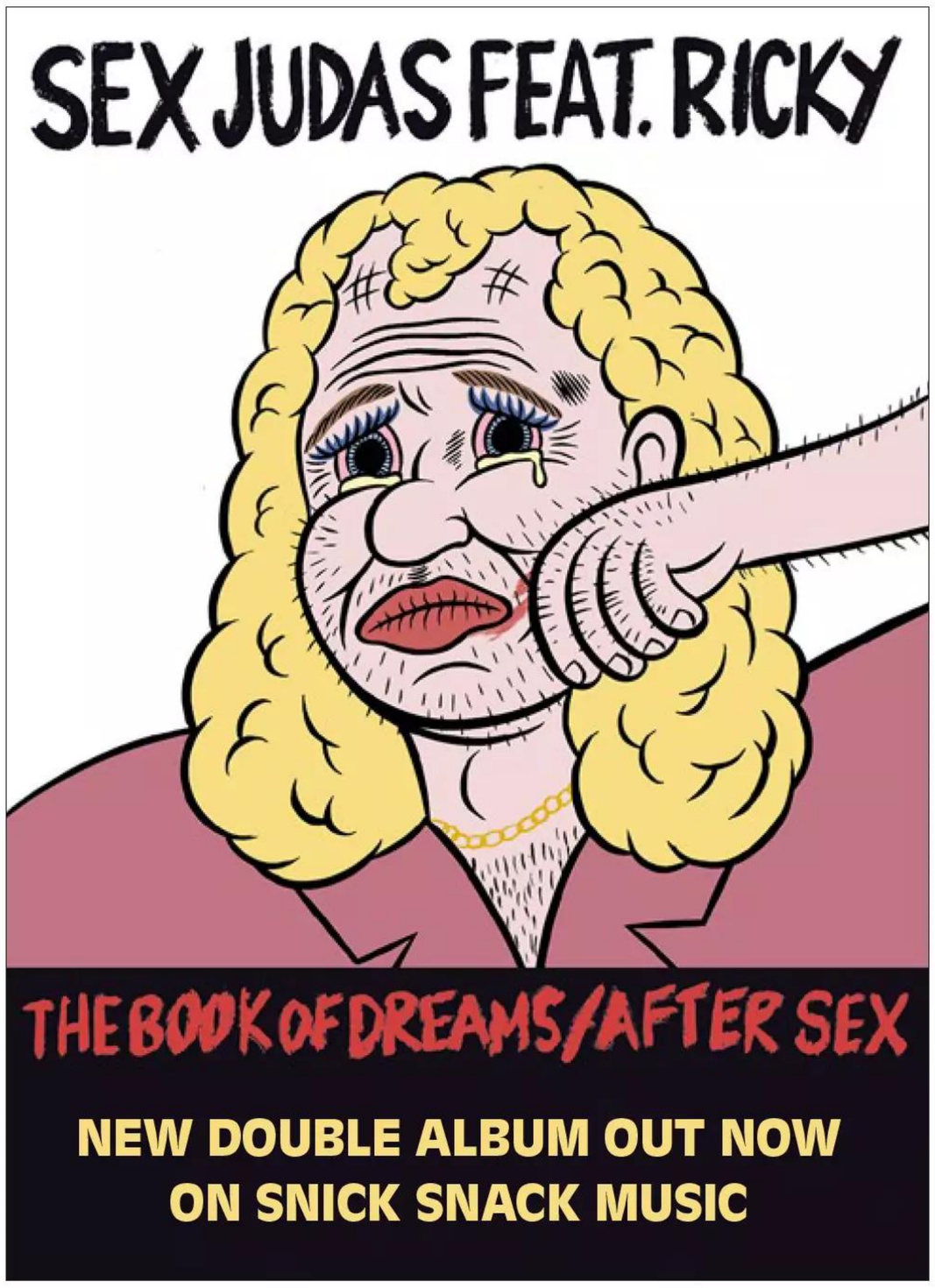
Published by Velocity Press, the epic roll call of those interviewed includes Langham Research Centre, Lawrence English, Scanner and Erland Cooper, while covering such diverse geographies as Norfolk, Ukraine, Antarctica and beyond. Order your copy now for £11.99. **velocitypress.uk**



ADOBE, OR NOT ADOBE

Software giant eyes AI music generation

One of the biggest names in software, but rarely mentioned in the world of music, Adobe are set to introduce a new editing tool that aims to become a kind of Photoshop for audio. Still in development, its official title is Project Music GenAI Control and it builds on the popular Firefly AI model to enable users to generate music from simple text prompts, such as "powerful rock" or "sad jazz". You can then edit the music, adjusting tempo, structure, intensity and more, depending on your needs. Love it or hate it, watch this space. **adobe.com**



PULSE

POLEVAULTER

Yorkshire's confrontational dance-punks

WHO?

Jon Franz and Dan Wearmouth, a Leeds duo who combine industrial beats and distorted synths with samples and belligerent vocals. Lazy comparisons will be made to Sleaford Mods, but Polevaulter are more angst-ridden, with fewer jokes about wanking. They sound genuinely distressed – both emotionally and financially.

WHY POLEVAULTER?

Originally, Polevaulter were a four-piece post-punk outfit with "noise elements", though when two members left, they seized an opportunity to plug in their synths.

"We spent 18 months figuring out how to do it all live and write longer songs," explains vocalist Franz, who suggests their confrontational sound is a reflection of the times.

"Since Covid, it seems life's getting worse. A lot of the songs are about my personal experience with things like housing or paying my bills, which sounds boring. But when you're trapped in the house and don't have much money, that's what you end up writing about. It's easy to end up feeling helpless and being angry."

TELL US MORE...

Rather than feel helpless in these desolate times, the band recently completed a marathon eight-hour livestream gig, performing their debut album 'Hang Wave' to raise funds for Gaza Sunbirds, an organisation that provides emergency food parcels and aid for those in the Strip. "It was as difficult as I thought it would be – a real challenge," says Franz.

"We did the album about 14 times. So we don't need to practise for a while now. We know those songs inside out."

WILL SIMPSON

'Hang Wave' is out now via Bandcamp

CUTE AS A BUTTON

Iconic analogue designs paid dues

It's a tall task to remember all of the objects digitisation shunted into extinction. But a new book called 'Analogue: A Field Guide' will help, with design expert Deyan Sudjic rifling through the drawers of bygone eras to unearth some of the greatest analogue gizmos from history. Who remembers the Copy-Jack, a portable machine that helped you to make instant copies of printed material? Or what about Kodak Carousels, the 1960s take on a smart slide projector? Grouped into four categories – sound, vision, information and communication – this book is for anyone obsessed with good design and a pathological hatred for any mention of "artificial intelligence". Order yours now for £30. **quarto.com**

PULSE

GROSS MOTOR

Intergalactic jungle gym adventures

WHO?

Hailing from Norwich – that's about all we know for now – Gross Motor is a producer already two decades into the game. Originally working between the drum 'n' bass realm and contemporary classical compositions, this particular project is a splattered convergence of many worlds – techno, glitch, industrial and ambient, to name a few.

WHY GROSS MOTOR?

His eponymous album, released late last year, shows the producer's sadistic penchant for putting a very loose permutation of dance music through its abstract and often unsettling paces. "My intention was to purposefully make the kind of music that comes completely naturally to me, without thinking about trying to fit into any specific genre or its associated conventions," he says. It makes for a bustling hive of mad electronic noise experiments which learn to walk on uneven surfaces ('Spröj' and 'Clatterate'), while leaning heavily into mangled, tripped-out body-horror-techno punk and intergalactic jungle gym adventures ('Zoetrope' and 'Intensification 90'). And then there are the swaggering, shapeshifting landscapes, where feral, polyrhythmic layers and blubbering beats ('Project Restart' and 'Shit Off') go to work.

TELL US MORE...

Electronic insurrectionist that he is, Gross Motor's music is saturated and stained, warped and distorted, but he's still intensely aware of how an album should take listeners on a journey that melts the senses into a wonderful, luminous goo. It's all counterbalanced by a meticulous, alchemical weave of edited drum patterns, complex programming and a deliberately rough-around-the-edges charm. "I'm about two-thirds through the second album," he confirms. "That will be released later in 2024, assuming I can finish it before the building in which my studio is based is demolished."

RYAN WALKER

'Gross Motor' is out now via Bandcamp

Eddy Grant tells us why he has British Airways to thank for his 1983 mega-hit single '**Electric Avenue**' – sort of

INTERVIEW: IAN BERRIMAN

"When I was out of The Equals, I started looking – 'What am I going to do with the rest of my life?'. Norman Beaton and I were great friends. One day he told me, 'You'd make a great actor, because you can tell great stories'. Norman was the head of the Black Theatre of Brixton, and he says, 'You should come up and see what we can do'.

"I was under his wing, and he taught me so much. One day I'm walking down Brixton high street, my eyes went up and I saw this sign that said Electric Avenue. I thought, 'What a great title for a song. One day I'm gonna get you baby, and we're gonna rock!'.

"Eventually, one winter was just too bad and I decided, 'OK, I'm going to move'. So I left my family in London to fend for themselves while I go out to Barbados and set up residence for them, and a studio for myself. I arrived without my baggage – British Airways couldn't find it. All I had on me was a little leather pouch in which I carried a toothbrush. All my songs that I'd planned to record had gone into the stratosphere.

"I've got no songs, and my business manager's telling me, 'The record company think you've run off with the money – what's happening?'. I said, 'Listen, this isn't a pee that you just go to the toilet and do! A whole process happens'. He says, 'Well, by then you've got no career'. I think that sparked something, because shortly thereafter I started writing.

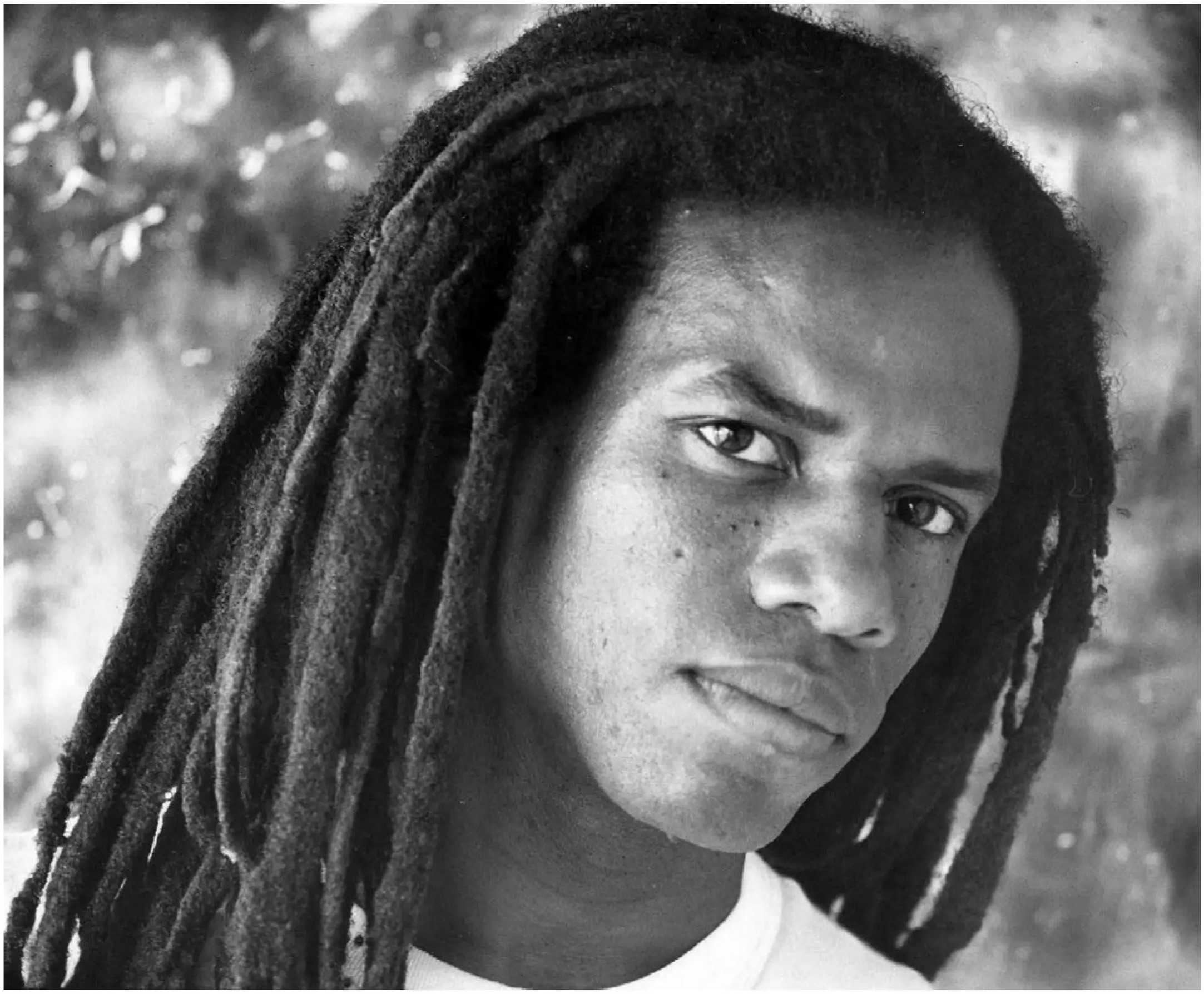
"Prior to coming out to Barbados, I'd had a meeting at the BBC with a gentleman who was the head, I think, of Radio 1. My brother had taken me to speak about the conditions of black people, especially those in the music business. They were not being given a hearing.

"He said, 'So what you're saying is you want us to play your music'. I said, 'You got it wrong. I'm *leaving* England. It's not me you've got to satisfy – play *their* music or else there's going to be an issue'. Those things melded into the songs. The messages are quite clear – 'Now in the streets there is violence'.

"'Electric Avenue' was a whole way of life for me at that time. I brought that with me across the ocean. In Barbados I sit, I look at the ocean, the vibes come and it becomes easy for me to write it. You're talking about a song that came so fast that almost before I had time to write the words I'd have to scribble things to remind me – there's this, there's that, and then it's out.

"Once I get to that point with a song, man, it's over. I have songs that have been sitting waiting to be finalised from five years ago and ain't no way they're going to see the light of day until they're really well cooked – the right words, the right nuances, the right everything. When that tune came along, I said, 'Goddamn, and you were waiting in the wings!'.

"If you listen to 'Electric Avenue', it's not a lot of music. I had a Minimoog – it all started there. I had an Oberheim OB-8, drums, guitars and various



pieces of outboard – expander, limiter, a compressor or two… very basic. So many sounds can be made from one sound, which is why I don't have a lot of equipment. What for? You can make so much out of so little. Give me two spoons and I'll make music.

"The sound like a motorbike happened by accident. I was trying to get a hand clap with the snare drum, and I wanted an effect on it. Frank Aggarat, my engineer, was operating, and every time he turned it a bit too much there was this distortion. It's the only time myself and Frank had words.

"Frank refused to add it to the snare. I said, 'Well, why don't you let me be responsible for this one?'. He said, 'Ed, you spend so much time doing things right, and now you're gonna go "RRRRRRRR"?'. I said, 'Frank, relax – run it again'. 'RRRRRRRR!' 'Oh god, oh no!' But running it so often he got used to it.

"I've got a friend called Howard Palmer, a big strapping Scotsman who taught me to play squash here in Barbados. He walked up the passageway as myself and Frank were having words, and he said, 'Listen man, I'm just a poor white man, an engineer who fixes roads – what the hell do I know? But Ed, that record that you're arguing over – that's going to be Number One with white people all over the world'. And time proved whatever it proved.

"When a sound like this comes up, it's like Jesus on the mountain to me. 'Thank god you sent me something that is unusual!' The key is to be looking, and respect that which is given to you by nature. I realised something only the other day – every sound that is made is made as a result of distortion. That's Eddy Grant's credo – everything is distortion. It's just the degree to which your sensibility allows.

"There's a neon sign on Electric Avenue now. It's right opposite Brixton tube station, so people can get on the Victoria line and go to see it. They go into the market, they stand there, and at night it's the eighth wonder of the world. It's become something of real intrinsic value to England. It reminds people that there was a history to electricity.

"So it's a good thing I lost that blasted baggage! I can almost say, subject to correction, thank you BA. Sometimes I'm accused of not pushing, but I've learned you can't push events. Just do the best you can, and the rest is waiting. I know things are happening all over the place that will impact me not so brilliantly, and I accept it with as much equanimity as if something was going to be brilliant for me, because they lead on to each other.

"And if there's one thing 'Electric Avenue' has taught me, it's that it ain't ready till it's baked. When it's baked, everything works."

'Electric Avenue' features on the 'Killer On The Rampage' album, which is now available on streaming platforms

SINE DINING

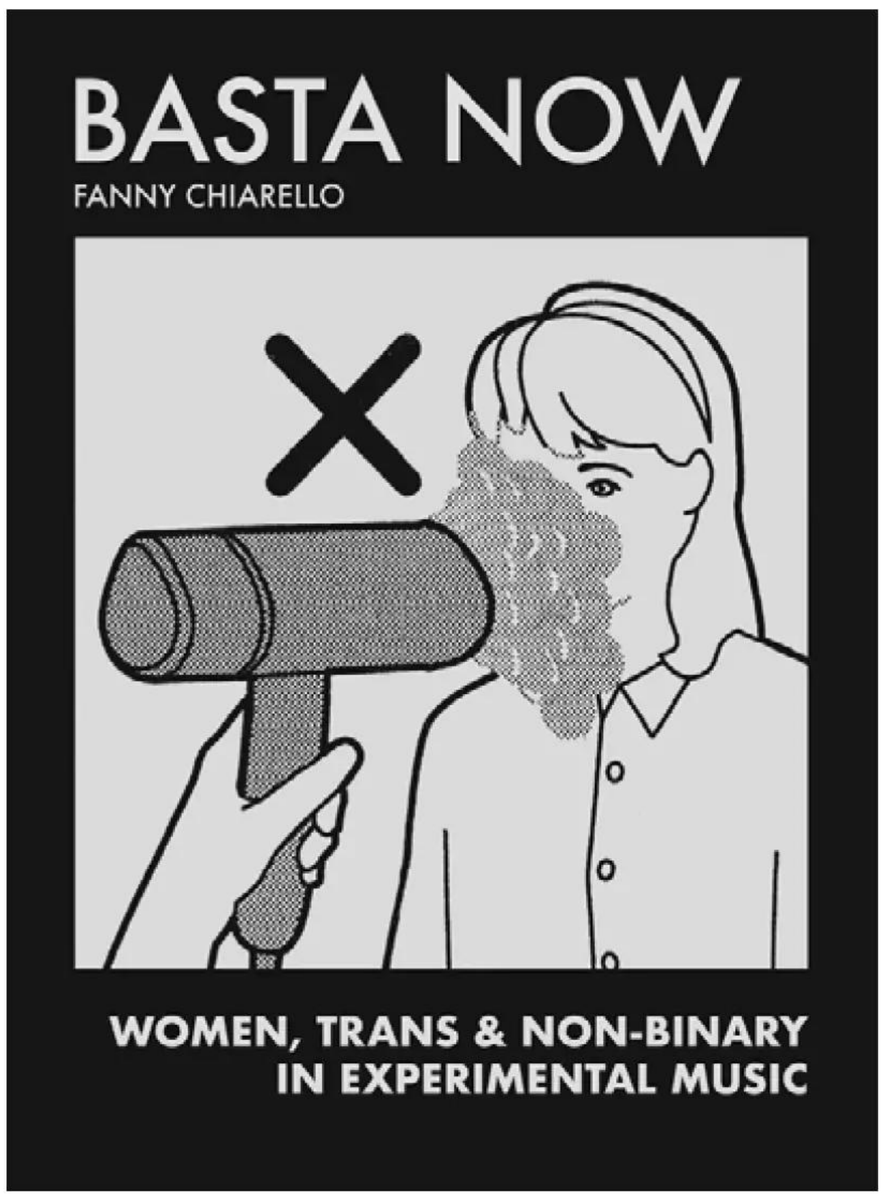
Debut device makes a splash

Floating Knobs is a brand new Eurorack developer based in Berlin comprising Dorian Largen and Ioana Vreme Moser. Their maiden instrument, the classily named Cuisine, is a 38HP sequencer offering complex rhythm generation over 12 tracks, with the ability to clock different ones independently. Tracks can interact with each other for custom polyrhythms, and there's masses of flexibility for user-defined scales and transposition, as well as ever-intriguing Euclidean rhythms. A mere €487, it comes in its own chassis too, and with its MIDI compatibility, it can properly endow your setup.
floatingknobs.com

TREASURE TROVE

Non-male music industry representation

'Basta Now: Women, Trans & Non-Binary In Experimental Music' is the ongoing project of French writer and music enthusiast Fanny Chiarello, who since 2017 has been documenting every female, trans and non-binary experimental musician she comes across. As both a diagnosis and prognosis of representation in the music industry ("This book has nothing against men, it's just not about them," says Chiarello), you'll find 2,371 names to sift through, along with a mini bio describing the work of each featured artist. Published by Permanent Draft, the all-female record label and micro-press founded by Chiarello and drummer Valentina Magaletti, you can order your copy now for £25.
permanentdraft.bandcamp.com/merch



ROBOT WARS

Book grapples with AI music revolution

Another one for the bookshelves of all ES readers, particularly those with a future-forward interest in music. 'The Music Code: Solving Schubert's Unfinished Symphony And Composing The Future' ponders what it means to be human in a world where machines can create music. The central thesis arose after author and composer Lucas Cantor Santiago was asked by Huawei to finish Franz Schubert's 'Unfinished Symphony' – which was famously left by the composer with only two movements – using AI. From very early musical experiments dating back 40,000 years, to a future where superintelligence writes symphonies, Santiago ponders how trailblazers like Pythagoras, Thomas Edison and Schubert himself grappled with the same questions and contradictions. Timely and extremely relevant, you can order 'The Music Code' for £26.99.
diversionbooks.com

THE YOUNG ONES

Making music is child's play... literally

Start your child's synthesiser obsession early with Blipbox MyTracks, a colourful piece of gear designed to introduce music making to all ages, even children as young as three. It's a genuinely impressive fully functional synth, with hundreds of built-in sounds, a microphone for sampling and graphical arrows to teach the basics of synthesis by showing the connection between the knobs, buttons and levers. Best of all, for any guilt-ridden parents fretting about screen time – it doesn't have one. Get yours in the coming months for £275. **blipbox.com**

THIS IS BRISTOL CALLING

Radio scanner for your modular system

It might look like little more than a novelty toy, but the BBCV from Bristol's Beepboop Electronics is a fully equipped FM radio for your Eurorack receiver set. Inspired by Delia Derbyshire's use of white noise, as well as the sampling potential of lifting material from stations themselves, it's housed in the 1U Taperack format and can accept control voltage to scan through to most FM radio stations in the UK and around the world. Not bad for £119.
beepboopelectronics.co.uk

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

SOLD OUT

NEVER MISS OUT

electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe

PHOTO: EVA PENTEL

BOYS KEEP SWINGING

Pet Shop Boys are back with ‘Nonetheless’, their 15th studio album and a fresh creative peak that imbues their quintessential electonic sound with string arrangements and live instruments. Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe chat about the making of the new record, punk rock, Rudolf Nureyev, kitchen discos, Schlager and even Donald Trump

WORDS: IAN GITTINS

When you've been making music together for 43 years, you've sold more than 50 million records, and you are the most successful duo in British music history, how do you keep things fresh and interesting and carry on enjoying each other's company?

It appears this crucial question about the Pet Shop Boys has been bothering people in very high places.

"The other week, I went out for dinner," divulges Neil Tennant. "And found myself sitting opposite George Osborne…"

"*George Osborne*?" inquires an incredulous Chris Lowe. "The Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

"The *former* Chancellor," corrects Neil. "Anyway, he started talking to me. I suppose he's the right age for the Pet Shop Boys. He certainly seemed very intrigued by us. He asked me, 'What's the secret of your and Chris' relationship? Because I'm thinking about me and David Cameron'."

"He asked *that*?" boggles Chris.

"Yes. And I said…"

At which point, Neil Tennant raises one immaculately scornful eyebrow.

"… well, clearly we enjoy what we do, and you don't."

It's a real joy to meet the Pet Shop Boys for the first time. They're exactly what you knew they would be like, but more so. Their impeccable comic timing, and seemingly telepathic understanding, makes the experience akin to encountering Morecambe and Wise, if Eric and Ernie had happened to make some of the greatest electronic music in chart history.

You wind them up and just watch them go. Neil is the arch, forensically eloquent pop historian and raconteur, a thousand lofty theories to hand. Chris is the perfect foil and sidekick, nodding along or intervening with a killer one-liner to puncture any notion in danger of getting too highfalutin'. You feel like applauding their joyful symbiosis.

We are talking, in the high-ceilinged room at Somerset House where they conduct all of their press interviews, because they have a new album out. And it's a record that arrives wrapped in one of those classic, knowing, instantly iconic titles in which Pet Shop Boys have always specialised – 'Nonetheless'.

Neil: "Yes. Our titles are normally something that we both say quite a lot. Like 'actually'."

Chris: "And Neil says 'nonetheless' *all the time*."

Neil: "I don't say it that much! I haven't said it today yet!"

Chris: "No, but you will. We've had a running battle on how to say the title. Because Neil keeps on pronouncing it 'Nun-theless'. We had the silly idea of dressing up like nuns on the cover."

Neil: "We? *You* did!"

It's fair to say that 'Nonetheless' is infinitely better than the 15th album by any artist has the right to be, let alone a duo who first got together in 1981, the year that Prince Charles married Lady Diana Spencer. It's a characteristically witty, effervescent exercise in immaculate electropop whose subjects range far and wide. And yet, they claim, it was made by accident.

Neil: "The songs were mostly written during lockdown. So, we wrote them not for an album, but for entertainment. We were just writing stuff and sending it to each other, for something to do."

Chris: "I didn't even realise that we'd started making an album. Then suddenly, Neil announced that we'd finished it."

The most obvious influence of lockdown is certainly evident in the album's sumptuous opening track, 'Loneliness'. "Who're you going to turn to out of loneliness?" wonders Neil, over a deliberately incongruous and cheery dance beat. Did the two of you find the solitariness imposed by the global virus unbearable, then?

Neil: "Not at all! I'd just moved into a new house in the Kent countryside. The first day of lockdown was actually a lovely sunny morning, and I thought, 'This is great!'."

Chris: "It was nice knowing that you couldn't really do anything, and everybody was in the same boat. It was a lovely feeling."

Neil: "Chris got me to download GarageBand. But the instructions to it assume that you know what they mean. I watched a couple of YouTube tutorials and phoned up Chris for help. Soon, I was programming songs I'd written as a teenager in the 1970s."

Chris: "I'm surprised you can remember them! There again, I don't have a memory at all."

Neil: "I recorded them onto a cassette back then. I don't have it anymore, but I could still remember them."

Chris: "Noel Gallagher said that if you can't remember it, it's not worth remembering. But I don't agree because some good songs are complicated. Look at Rufus Wainwright."

There are also echoes of that very long, inert summer of 2020 in 'Why Am I Dancing?', a song that finds Neil pondering "Why am I dancing / When I feel so alone?" as he cuts a solitary rug at home. Yet this was a track with a rather curious genesis.

Neil: "We've written a stage musical called 'Naked', based on 'The Emperor's New Clothes' by Hans Christian Andersen. We've finished it. The song comes from that."

Chris: "I watched a TV documentary about Andrew Lloyd Webber and then wrote a song that Elaine Paige might sing, called 'How Did I Get Here?'. I sent it to Neil, then we did a dance mix of it that became 'Why Am I Dancing?'."

Neil: "I like the fact that it's very philosophical and it doesn't really have a chorus. Well, either that, or it's all chorus."

Chris: "Were you really dancing at home, on your own?"

Neil: "Yes. In my kitchen."

Chris: "Now *that* is a TV programme they ought to make. 'Dancing In My Kitchen With Neil Tennant'."

Well, if it's good enough for Sophie Ellis-Bextor…

A major, standout track on 'Nonetheless' is 'New London Boy'. Heartfelt yet determined ("I'll aim for the stars / And learn how to swim with the sharks"), it finds Neil recalling sepia memories of moving to the capital from Newcastle in 1973. Remarkably, this was more than half a century ago. Does that feel impossible to believe now?

"It feels impossible to believe that I'm 70 in July," he muses.

Nevertheless, even at this vast age, he vividly remembers the day he first decided to move there.

"My father was a salesman," he says. "One day in 1967, when I was 13, he had to drive to London and back in a single day and he took me with him. We left Newcastle at 5am, drove to London, and had lunch in J Lyons Corner House in Cambridge Circus. Then he said, 'Right, I'll see you back here at 6.30!'. I mean, parents don't do that nowadays!

"I liked theatre, so I walked down Shaftesbury Avenue, and I couldn't believe there was theatre after theatre after theatre. In Newcastle, we just had one. Then I got the Tube from Piccadilly Circus to South Kensington and went to the V&A and the British Museum."

"It's amazing the police didn't pick you up," comments Chris. "A lone child walking round London! You could have been a runaway."

"I was back at J Lyons at half past six," continues Neil. "My dad then drove me round London, sightseeing Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. We got back home to Newcastle about four in the morning and I thought, 'Right! I'm moving to London!'."

On the album, the protagonist of 'New London Boy' describes crippling self-doubt and existential angst ("I remember wondering, 'Who am I?' / And what will I turn out to be? / I know where I have to go / To unlock the secret me") on moving to the capital, but Neil Tennant in 1973 was clearly made of sterner stuff. As he reminisces about his early days in London, the stories come tumbling out.

"I got a flat in Tottenham with two friends from Newcastle," he remembers. "I was only just 18. We still all looked really young. We'd get dressed up to go into the West End. Once, we were sitting in the entrance of the Regent Palace Hotel, and the manager threw us out because he thought we were rent boys. Which we were thrilled to bits about!

"I went to North London Poly. Everything was glam rock, so I dyed my hair red and wore platform shoes. We used to go to Biba and buy glittery things in their sales. And we'd buy women's shoes because men's weren't colourful enough. I got used to wearing shoes one-and-a-half sizes too small. My toes were curled up – I still remember the pain! We started going to gay clubs, and other clubs…"

"*Other* clubs?" questions Chris. "Fetish clubs?"

"No, *not* fetish clubs!" rebuts Neil. "Just non-gay clubs. We'd go to the Sombrero on Kensington High Street. We could only afford one drink all night, but it had a lighted dancefloor and David Bowie went there. We loved Bowie. I went to his last two 'Ziggy Stardust' shows at Hammersmith Odeon."

Ever the voracious culture vulture, Neil soon became fascinated by the mid-70s punk rock explosion. A friend took him along to one of the Sex Pistols' earliest gigs, at the Nashville Rooms in Kensington in 1976.

"People were saying that the Sex Pistols couldn't play, but as soon as they started it was clear that was nonsense – they were pretty good," he recalls. "Johnny Rotten was very theatrical, like he was playing a part. The venue was quite near Earls Court, and so I remember there were a lot of Australians at the gig, in anoraks.

"I was also present on the famous occasion when Sid Vicious beat up Nick Kent from the NME at the 100 Club. He hit him with a bicycle chain – there was blood splattered all over the place. Johnny Rotten pretended to join in. I wrote a piece about it, and sent it in to the NME, of which I was a resolute reader. They printed it and said, 'By reader Neil Tennant, SW1'."

Why did Vicious beat up Kent?

"Because he was a hippy!" chortles Chris.

"No, he *wasn't* a hippy," asserts Neil. "He used to wear black. When I was at Smash Hits years later, it was right opposite the NME – we used to look out of the window and laugh at Nick Kent walking down Carnaby Street, trying so hard to look elegantly wasted."

Riffing partly off Bowie's 'The London Boys' – the B-side of his 'Rubber Band' single from 1966 – 'New London Boy' brilliantly captures that typically heady excitement of the first days and nights after moving to a new city, especially one you've only gawped at from the provinces since you were a teen. Neil's own early adventures there included a spell as a production editor at Marvel Comics.

"I worked on The Fantastic Four, Dracula Lives! and Conan The Barbarian," he recalls. "The Conan comics were beautiful, almost pre-Raphaelite, but my favourite was always Spider-Man. I had zero interest in the superhero side, but I loved the soap opera element to Peter Parker – his girlfriend, and his aunt, and the fact he was a journalist.

"Stan Lee came over to promote a Marvel book and I arranged a PR tour for him. That was the first time I met Janet Street-Porter, who was working on 'The London Weekend Show' at LWT. She wanted Stan but we couldn't do it because I got him on 'Blue Peter', and they insisted on an exclusive.

"We put on a Marvel exhibition at the ICA to promote Stan's book, and it got so mobbed by schoolkids that they had to shut it down. Marc Bolan came to the launch party, as did Roy Wood from Wizzard. Did I like Stan Lee? Not particularly. He complained a *lot*."

"I moved to London a few years after Neil, and it was brilliant," chips in Chris. "But I'm always wondering where to live. Even now. Whenever Pet Shop Boys go anywhere, we're always looking at property. I can imagine living in Italy…"

"Yes, that does sound nice," agrees Neil.

"But we're running out of time!" says Chris.

"Yes," says Neil, sighing. "That's the thing with being nearly 70. I need to get a move on with *everything*."

Alongside the elements of nostalgia and introspection that are inevitable attributes of an album largely conceived and written in lockdown, 'Nonetheless' also celebrates some of the historical figures that loom large on Pet Shop Boys' cultural radar. Among them is Rudolf Nureyev, the flamboyant subject of their recent single 'Dancing Star'.

So why Nureyev?

"I've always had an interest in ballet," says Neil. "When I was very young, my mother took me twice to see the Royal Ballet in Newcastle. When I was nine, I decided that I wanted to be a ballet dancer. I took 'Teach Yourself Ballet' out of the library, and made my brother do bar exercises with me on the radiator. I soon realised that ambition wasn't going to work out, and it didn't last very long. Nonetheless…"

"Ha! You said it, see!" yells Chris, triumphantly.

"Yes OK, I said it!" concedes Neil. "There it is, in its natural habitat! Anyway… nonetheless, when I moved to London, I had a friend at the Royal Ballet School, and he always had all the latest chat. 'Oh, Rudi's affair with Margot [Fonteyn] is back on!'

"I had this title in my notebook, 'Dancing Star'. Nureyev was such a fascinating figure and a wild character. He was born on the Trans-Siberian Express and trained in the Russian classical ballet style. He defected to the West in 1961 when he gave his KGB minders the slip while on tour in Paris with the Kirov Ballet."

'Dancing Star' opens with that very incident, describing how Nureyev "Jumped the barrier at Orly Airport / Claimed political asylum there". Except that this account is not strictly correct.

"No, it's a factual error," winces Neil, who probably cares more about such things than most. "After we'd recorded the song, I found out the defection actually happened at Le Bourget. Then Nureyev came to London, joined the Royal Ballet and became a true superstar. He was a part of the whole swinging London thing. Yet he was also a very tempestuous, temperamental, rude person."

"Ooh, he was a nightmare!" interjects Chris, in his broadest Lancashire.

Wikipedia records, somewhat pruriently, that Nureyev led "a turbulent personal life with numerous bathhouse visits and anonymous pick-ups".

"Well, to be fair, he wasn't the only person doing that," says Neil. "And, of course, he died of AIDS."

The real tragedy is that were a Nureyev-type figure to defect from Russia to the West today, Putin would probably get him within months.

"We made a video for 'Dancing Star' yesterday and we were talking to a dancer from the Royal Ballet," says Neil. "He told us that Russian ballet dancer Sergei Polunin, who used to dance with the Royal Ballet, has a portrait of Putin tattooed on his chest."

The Pet Shop Boys have made many trips to Russia over the years.

"We have, but I don't think we'll be going back any time soon!" says Chris.

What are your main memories and impressions of the country?

"Our first visit was in 1992," explains Neil. "We went over there to launch 'MTV Russia'."

"That huge GUM department store on Red Square was empty," recalls Chris. "They had nothing to sell. On the other hand, McDonald's had just opened. We saw Russia change enormously over the years."

"We went to Saint Petersburg to visit Brian Eno," says Neil. "His wife produced a gig for us. And Moscow turned into a glittering city. For years, Russia was part of the regular touring schedule. We even kicked off our 'Pandemonium' tour in Saint Petersburg in 2009.

"Russia has always been a fascinating country and it's tragic what has happened to it. Completely tragic. There is absolutely no reason why Russia can't be part of the world and, after Gorbachev and Yeltsin, everybody assumed it would be."

Do you think Soviet-style communism was always a doomed enterprise because it was so at odds with the basic tenets of human nature? At which point, a smiling Neil Tennant fixes me with what appears to be a mildly exasperated glare.

"Is this really an appropriate subject for this interview about our album for Electronic Sound magazine?"

No. No, I guess it probably isn't.

PHOTO: ALASDAIR McLELLAN

PHOTO: ALASDAIR McLELLAN

From the sublime to the ridiculous. From one side of the world to the other. A further tremendous track on 'Nonetheless', 'Bullet For Narcissus', is sung from the perspective of one of Donald Trump's Secret Service bodyguards during his tenure as US president ("I wonder if he's realised / That right behind him he's despised"). What inspired Neil to tackle this subject matter?

"It's called imagination," he deadpans, eyes twinkling. "Talent. No, it started when I read somewhere that Trump's Secret Service men all hated him, but *nonetheless*…"

"Oh, he's in full flow now!' says Chris. "Shall we keep count of how many times he says it?"

"… but, nonetheless, had to defend him with their lives, if necessary. That's the irony of their job."

Surely if any sentient soul saw somebody pointing a gun at Donald Trump, they'd move out of the way?

"I'd be firing it!" says Chris.

"Well, *they* can't," continues Neil. "I see the song as being from a musical about Donald Trump, sung by a chorus of his bodyguards. That's one of the great things about being a songwriter. Imagining that you're somebody else."

Donald Trump is a Martin Amis character, isn't he? A hyper-exaggerated, venal, corrupt, lewd politician. A man not possessed of a single redeeming feature. Even his name is bathetic. When you were a kid, didn't to "trump" mean to fart?

"Yes, it did in Blackpool," affirms Chris.

"I'm not sure it did in Newcastle. I think we used to say 'pump'," mulls Neil.

Back in the day, we all laughed knowingly at the perceived dumbness of Ronald Reagan. We did the same to George W Bush. But Trump is a whole new level of malign stupidity.

"What worries me is that someone will come along who is even worse than Trump," continues Neil. "I mean, how low can you go? He's just easily won the Republican nomination in spite of all his criminal charges, his sexual assault charges, even saying you can fight Covid by drinking bleach. It's madness.

"The weird thing is that the American economy is doing really well now. The Democrats never get the credit for that. People forget Bill Clinton paid off the national debt. The Republicans wasted no time in bringing that back."

Trump routinely gets accused of being fascist but, essentially, he appears to be completely banal – an insult that you level at him in 'Bullet For Narcissus'. Do you think it's possible to be both, Neil? A banal fascist?

"Yes. Fascism is saying easy, banal things which, on investigation, are total rubbish. But on the surface they can seem kind of attractive."

How much do you worry about Trump getting back in?

"Well, he probably will, won't he?" says Chris.

"I don't know," replies Neil. "I wonder if something is going to happen that means neither Trump nor Biden end up winning. Biden is a consummate politician. I think he's been a more effective president than Obama. But the age thing is obviously an issue, even if it's only because people always make it an issue."

Could Britain spawn a Trump figure? We've already had tribute acts in Boris Johnson and Liz Truss…

"I think they're both more political creatures than Trump," declares Neil. "The Trump of Britain is Nigel Farage, the most successful British politician since Margaret Thatcher. He's a one-issue politician who achieved his aim."

Of course the brilliant thing – the totally Pet Shop Boys thing – about this song is that it tackles these weighty societal and political issues over a delirious, jauntily irresistible dance beat.

"Yes!" exclaims Neil. "*That's* what I like! I love the fact that the phrase 'a bullet for Narcissus' sings really cheerfully. It's quite chirpy."

With society more fractured and pressured than ever – not just on both sides of the Atlantic but seemingly across all corners of the globe – it's tempting to reminisce fondly about eras in the past that felt cohesive and positive. On 'Nonetheless', 'A New Bohemia' seems to be suffused in just such a warm glow.

Neil: "Yes, it's a nostalgic song. It's about how we led more bohemian lives in the 1990s than we do today. Chris and I knew all the Young British Artists. We'd see them in the Groucho Club – Sam Taylor-Wood, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin. It was a real scene. I feel like it's contracted now."

Britart ran alongside Britpop. Yet you were more likely to be found in the Groucho than the Good Mixer?

Neil: "I don't believe I've ever been to the Good Mixer."

Chris: "Yes, you have. We went once, long after it was all over, remember? We went to the Amy Winehouse pub once as well, a long time after that was a big thing."

Neil: "Our Camden Town period was a lot earlier – the early 80s. We'd go to a studio on Camden Road, then have a kebab."

Chris: "From Andy's Kebabs."

Neil: "Which is still there. Then we'd go to the Black Cap, the sort of gay pub that just doesn't exist anymore. I'd go on to Camden Palace – I was on Smash Hits in those days, so I could get in. I could charge it to expenses if I had a chat with Gary Kemp."

Chris: "Now *that* was a scene!"

It's strange how Pet Shop Boys were a major British pop act throughout the 90s, making hugely successful albums – 'Very' got to Number One in 1993 – yet you were never remotely associated with Britpop.

Neil: "Britpop was a generation younger than us. And it was essentially guitar bands, which we are very much not. But we knew some of them… We remixed 'Girls & Boys' for Blur and saw them miming to our mix on TV. And we knew Damon from very early on."

Chris: "I remember him coming into the studio in a Tacchini tracksuit. I thought, 'Huh! I was wearing that 10 years ago'."

Did you tell him?

Chris: "No, I didn't want to get into a fashion battle. And it was retro by that point."

Neil, when the whole Blur versus Oasis conflict kicked off, did any part of you wish you were still a journalist at Smash Hits, covering it?

"No, not at all. But Damon told me he had started all that. He deliberately changed the release date of the Blur single to the same day as the Oasis one." [Blur released 'Country House' and Oasis put out 'Roll With It' on the same day in 1995.]

Chris: "Blur won the battle but lost the war, didn't they?"

Neil: "Ah, but did they really? How long does the war go on? And who's to say it's over?"

Chris: "Yeah, maybe it's another Hundred Years' War!"

By far the most curious confection on the pleasingly multifaceted 'Nonetheless' is 'The Schlager Hit Parade'. It's an upbeat, throbbing Euro-pulse which celebrates the catchy, uber-sentimental strain of Central European chart pop known as Schlager. Are you taking the piss out of it?

Chris: "Not at all! We love Schlager music! Which astounds our German friends. No, it horrifies them, actually."

Neil: "We have an apartment in Berlin. There was a gay bar near to it, sadly now closed down, called the Harlekin. Inside, it was what the Germans call 'gemütlich' – cosy and comfortable."

Chris: "And, being in Berlin, smokey. Everywhere in Berlin is full of smoke. It's unbearable."

Neil: "It had quite an old gay crowd and they'd play 70s and 80s Schlager."

Chris: "Schlager is not niche in Germany. It's huge. You see posters all over Berlin for Schlager parties. Schlager bands sell out the arena in Berlin for multiple nights."

Neil: "It's singalong, drinking music, and it's totally unhip. Back when we worked with Harold Faltermeyer on 'Behaviour' in 1990, he was also a Schlager producer. In his bar, we'd hear all these Schlager songs. Abba are basically Schlager, and probably a big influence on it.

"It was the same thing when we worked on the 'Hotspot' album in 2020 at Hansa Studio. For us, Hansa will always be most famous for Bowie and Iggy, but we looked at the records that had been made there, and the vast majority were Schlager."

Don't Schlager lyrics tend towards the vacuous?

Chris: "We don't know! They're all in German!"

And yet, being the Pet Shop Boys, you have made a *cerebral* Schlager song. The opening lyric gently croons, "If you think you're going down / In hazel, black and brown", which were the colours of Germany's National Socialist Party – the Nazis.

Neil: "Yes. It's about how, after the Second World War, Germans couldn't look back into their history because it was so appalling. So, they had to look forward to a jolly future."

We always assume that Kraftwerk, and krautrock, were the Germans' musical break from the past. Maybe it was Schlager all along.

Chris: "Well, it certainly sells a lot more!"

Neil: "Yes, our song is about Schlager, but I think it also works as pure Schlager. Our producer, James Ford, said of all the songs on 'Nonetheless', it was the one he wasn't quite sure about."

Chris: "I'm still amazed that it made it onto the album, quite frankly! But very pleased."

Ideally, you know, it should be a big summer hit in Benidorm and come with its own dance routine – like Black Lace.

Chris: "Yes, that would be great!"

Neil: "And why not? It's got a great melody, and big singalong potential."

PHOTO: ALASDAIR McLELLAN

As is their habit, the Pet Shop Boys' conversation roams far and wide, and they hold forth freely and openly on every subject that arises in our interview. Our thoughts turn briefly to the late Tom Watkins, the band's famously mouthy first manager, who went on to manage Bros and Electribe 101. Talking to Electronic Sound recently, Electribe 101 singer Billie Ray Martin recalled her horror at a Watkins ultimatum: "Unless you dye your hair red and wear a fucking bowler hat, you'll never make another record!"

Neil looks aghast.

"He said *that*? Really? Oh, Tom!"

Did he ever give you any similarly bizarre instructions?

"No, absolutely not!" says Neil. "The difference in our relationship was that Tom was scared of us. He had no creative or stylistic influence on us whatsoever. We made that very clear.

"Tom had his strengths. We signed with him because I knew he could get us a deal with EMI, and he did. He was great at going into record companies and banging his fist on desks, and you need that sometimes. He could be good fun. And deep down, he was very proud of us, even though he slagged us off in his memoir."

"What was that thing he wrote about you?" asks Chris.

"She swans around like she's fucking Noël Coward," says Neil.

"Yes, that was it!" says Chris.

Billie Ray said he wanted to sack her from Electribe 101, and she had heard that he also tried to fire Chris from the Pet Shop Boys.

"That's right, he did," attests Chris.

"One day, Tom said to me, 'We all know Chris doesn't do anything!'," says Neil. "And I said, 'Well, actually, he's just written nearly all of a new song called 'Suburbia'!"

"I suppose some people would have been upset by that, wouldn't they?" reflects Chris. "Luckily, I couldn't give a flying fuck."

And so to the question that, well, taxed George Osborne when they met him. After more than 40 years, what *is* the secret of their longevity?

"The secret?" repeats Neil. "I think the essence of it is… we like writing songs, and we still have the energy to do it. As I said right at the start of this interview, we began writing these songs not to make an album, but for something to do and for pleasure. We still find a childish sense of play in it."

So, the secret is?

"Not thinking about it too much," he says.

What's the worst fall-out you've ever had? There's a pause. Neil genuinely seems to be wracking his brain.

"Hmm. We never have, really. Occasional… bickering."

"We may have had a row at some point but, like I say, I've got a terrible memory," says Chris. "I'm always asking Neil why we don't like someone. I say, 'I know we don't like them, but what was the reason?'."

When Pet Shop Boys are lying fallow, do you speak on the phone and text? Or do you take a break from one another?

"We never lie fallow," says Neil.

"We never do *what*?" asks Chris.

"Lie fallow. That's what Ian said."

"Lie fallow?" says Chris, flummoxed. "What does that bloody mean? Who says that down the pub? *'Are you lying fallow?'*."

"Anyway, it never really happens," says Neil. "There's always some Pet Shop Boys business or other to talk about."

After all these years, Pet Shop Boys occupy a rarefied plane. They've moved way beyond being admired and influential to being almost universally venerated. Do you find this adulation enjoyable or tiresome?

"I don't like veneration and I certainly don't feel venerated," says Neil, shaking his head. "I mean, just go to YouTube and read the comments beneath our version of 'All The Young Dudes' – people are outraged by it!"

"Ooh, I haven't read those!" says Chris. "Something to look forward to!"

I was actually thinking more of the current music press, or what's left of it. You're in a select, elite group, alongside artists such as Nick Cave and Radiohead, who never really seem to get bad reviews. There's a continuous hum of approval.

"I still see nit-picking," avers Neil. "But I think, broadly speaking, it is quite unusual for an artist to be around for a long period of time, maintain the quality of their work and have the same levels of creativity and attention to detail. And I think we do."

Also, the critical landscape has changed considerably. Post-1976, it was the scorched-earth norm to regard older, established artists with contempt. Now, as punk rock and its cultural influence recede ever further into the rear-view mirror, acts of your vintage are far more likely to be lauded.

"Well, I *am* the person [at Smash Hits] who coined the phrase, 'It's like punk never happened!'," Neil reminds us, with a grin. "But I still regard the Pet Shop Boys as having some kind of root in punk rock."

How so?

"In that we're more against than for things," he says. "We still like to be provocative, in that classic punk rock way. I remember years ago, someone said to us, 'To tour America, you have to have a live drummer'. And Chris immediately turned around to him and said, 'We are having no musicians onstage!'. And that's what we did. It's completely punk rock!"

Yes, it is. *Nonetheless*.

'Nonetheless' is out now on Parlophone. Pet Shop Boys play live at London's Royal Opera House from 23-27 July as part of their 2024 European tour

PHOTO: ALASDAIR McLELLAN

PHOTO: ALASDAIR McLELLAN

PET PROJECT

Producer **James Ford** talks about working with the Pet Shop Boys on ‘Nonetheless’

A former member of Simian, currently in The Last Shadow Puppets and one half of the electronic duo Simian Mobile Disco, James Ford has produced work by Depeche Mode, Gorillaz, Blur, Arctic Monkeys, Foals, Everything Everything, Jessie Ware and The Last Dinner Party, among countless others.

“I was delighted to be asked to produce ‘Nonetheless’ as I’m a long-time Pet Shop Boys admirer,” he says. “They were part of my soundtrack to growing up. I remember as a kid, watching them on ‘Top Of The Pops’ and thinking they were different from everyone else.

“They told me they liked my electronic work in Simian Mobile Disco, but what took me by surprise was they were also fans of the Scott Walker-like strings in The Last Shadow Puppets. Neil and Chris had been to one of our gigs, which I didn’t know.

“On ‘Nonetheless’, their plan from the get-go was to make Pet Shop Boys-sounding songs but with a very 3D, cinematic element. So, we were keeping the backing tracks very stripped out, like on ‘West End Girls’, and writing string arrangements.

“They came in with pretty well-formed songs and demos they had produced on their laptops. Neil is very specific about how he records his voice. He’d sing a song once, then sing it exactly the same to double-track it, and then triple-track it. And as soon as that third track went on – boom! – it was the Pet Shop Boys. It’s what they do, and it just *works*.

“Neil and Chris were very easy to be around and to work with. They’re both handy with chords, melodies and production, and had great producer stories and anecdotes about Bobby O and Trevor Horn. I was in my element!

“They just get on great as a duo. There was none of the angst or animosity I’ve witnessed in some older acts I’ve worked with. They gave each other room to be creative. I think they even went out for dinner together every night. There is just a great friendship there that has managed to survive.

“We mostly worked in my home studio in Hackney. We’d go out for lunch, and when we came back, Chris would often have a nice post-lunch snooze on my sofa. It’s only a little two-seater, so he had to dangle his legs off the end.

“Once I got used to the slightly surreal aspect of the Pet Shop Boys hanging around my kitchen as I made coffee, it was a joy from start to finish. Would I like to work with them again? I’d absolutely love to… but that’s up to them, of course.”

As Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, Gordon Chapman-Fox has explored the utopian dreams of 1970s town planning over the course of five albums. His latest release, 'Your Community Hub', completes his transformation from wry hauntologist to strident political commentator

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: MEG KERR

CARRY ON IN THE COMMUNITY HUB

"I'm not sure if I'm actually still classed as 'hauntology' – or even what hauntology is!" smiles Gordon Chapman-Fox. "I love a lot of people who make music that's purely nostalgic in that way, and it sounds fantastic. But I'm not interested in just looking backwards. I want to look at today and tomorrow as well as yesterday. So it's about creating a dialogue between the past and the present."

The rise of Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan has been one of the most bizarre yet heart-warming musical success stories of recent years. Released in 2021, the debut album 'Interim Report, March 1979' felt like the most niche hauntological project imaginable – a muzzy synth exploration of a half-remembered Cheshire town planning project, complete with tongue-in-cheek nods to a halcyon age of dandruff-laden councillors sporting kipper ties and plastic shoes.

But it touched an entirely unexpected nerve. Re-press after re-press sold out, and four subsequent albums have done similarly impressive hot cake impersonations, with the Warrington-Runcorn fan base now large enough to populate a sizeable brutalist New Town in its own right. And 2023's 'The Nation's Most Central Location' was Electronic Sound's Album Of The Year, of course.

GRANDMOTHER
moog

The new collection, 'Your Community Hub', completes a transformation of the project's ethos, an evolution that has been growing steadily over the course of five immaculate records. Gordon Chapman-Fox, by his own admission, has become less wry nostalgist and more political agitator. Joined by his adorable terrier, Scamp, he swigs from a mug of tea and shrugs modestly.

"As I've looked more and more into the history of New Towns, I've thought, 'Hang on – all the problems these towns were meant to solve 50 years ago are now even bigger problems'," he says.

"I suppose, for the first couple of albums, I hadn't done as much research as I have now. But the more I learn about urban planning, the more I realise that it's not the dry subject it sounds like. It's about people. And about treating people with respect. As opposed to our current way of life, which just treats people as bags of cash to be milked."

The new album, as the title suggests, uses an array of warm, modular sounds to epitomise the distinctly 1970s concept of the "community hub".

"At one of my London gigs, I was approached by a guy called Richard Garvin," explains Gordon. "He said, 'I really like your music – and by the way, my dad Peter helped design Runcorn New Town!'. He'd brought a big book of photographs and drawings his dad had left him, and it was fascinating. So the idea for this album very much came from him, and from discovering that Runcorn was designed to be a town where you wouldn't need a car. Everyone would be able to walk to a community hub."

Hang on though, Gordon! Isn't this basically the 15-minute city? Surely that's a modern instrument of woke totalitarianism designed to make it illegal to take your car to Sainsbury's? I've seen that stated as FACT by angry people on Twitter, or whatever the hell it's called these days.

"Yes, it does play a lot into the 15-minute city idea," he agrees. "Something that's now making a lot of right-wing people very agitated. Apparently they don't *want* all the things they need in close proximity to where they live.

"But the Castlefields Centre – the community hub designed by Peter Garvin – had a doctor's surgery, a Post Office, a laundrette, a pub, a supermarket and a community hall you could hire out. And just outside, a primary school and a faith centre. The idea was very much for these places to be like a village in their own right, with nobody's house more than five minutes' walk away. It really does seem quite idyllic. Why would you not want that?"

The publicity for 'Your Community Hub' tellingly quotes one of the more notorious political statements of the late 20th century. In 1987, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher granted an exclusive interview to noted Westminster journal Woman's Own. The most infamous extract from the published piece?

"I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand, 'I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it'. And so they are casting their problems on society – and who is society? There is no such thing."

Does "there is no such thing as society", I wonder, feel like a watershed in British political attitudes towards that collective spirit? And the end of the government's desire to build hubs and facilities deliberately designed to engender it?

"It totally does," says Gordon. "It feels very much like a point where we stopped having shared, communal experiences. I hate to take this back to lockdown, but I thought that every time we clapped for NHS workers on our doorsteps, it showed that people were coming together again as a community. We were all sharing that experience, seeing our neighbours in the street and saluting the people who were doing all the hard work.

"It felt like that almost frightened the government somehow. Post-Barnard Castle, it seemed like they went out of their way to undermine any idea of us actually co-operating and working together. The one thing that they don't want is everyone uniting. Which is ironic, because now everyone is united in hating the bastards. So no, you don't have to look much beyond 'there is no such thing as society' to find the starting point for the awful way that we're now forced to live our lives. Sorry, I'm on my high horse here."

I've been looking at my 1984 diary recently, I tell him. I was 11, and there was a day when I was hobbling around with a nasty blister on my foot. My dad was at work and my mum didn't drive, so we called the doctor's surgery and our GP actually came round to the house with a tube of ointment for me. It's a tiny moment, but one that feels unthinkable in 2024. And it does seem emblematic of an era when we arguably felt more cared for by the powers-that-be.

"Yeah," he says, nodding. "You had the post-war consensus, the Labour legacy of 1945 onwards. They created the NHS and the New Town movement. And the whole crux of that movement was, 'People have suffered – let's make things better for them'.

"I was talking to someone the other day at a gig in Liverpool who said he'd been moved to a house in Runcorn in the 1970s because he had been living in a tiny, two-up-two-down terrace with his mum, his dad, his wife and his infant son.

"The housing corporation came to him and said, 'We'll give you a house in Runcorn'. Not 'You can lease a house', but 'We will *give* you a house'. And it was so spacious compared to the tiny terrace he'd lived in before – he was amazed that he could walk around in the kitchen."

So has this move away from community living and what privileged twonks refer to as the "nanny state" changed us as a people? He pauses for a long time.

"That's a good question," he sighs. "I think we've all become far more cynical and jaded as a population. On the left wing as well as the right. Going back to clapping in the streets – some people on the left sneered at it, but I thought it was a wonderful thing. Whether that cynicism is down to MPs being dodgy and on the take, or whether it's just the 'fending for ourselves' nature of modern life, I wouldn't like to say.

"We're definitely more predisposed to be negative, though. That collaborative, community atmosphere seems to have gone now. It's just little things like knocking on your neighbours' door to make sure they're alright. So many people don't even know their neighbours' names. It's affected us all."

This is all getting quite heavy. Even poor Scamp has done a bunk. Should we talk about music instead? For all our grumbles about jaded negativity, 'Your Community Hub' is a warm and fuzzy-sounding album. The wobbly electronic sweeps of 'Summer All Year Round' are a heartfelt tribute to the optimistic 1970s advertising slogan of Runcorn Shopping City ("It was one of the first covered shopping centres in the UK!" beams Gordon) and 'Pedestrian Shopping Deck' is an expansive synth evocation of the Castlefields Centre's futuristic split-level design.

The album might be intended as a swipe at the abandonment of these utopian values, but it's also still a gladdening evocation of more optimistic times. Even though Castlefields itself was demolished in 2004.

"To me, it's an album very much about culture and community," affirms Gordon. "Some of the tracks are a bit more optimistic than on recent Warrington-Runcorn records, and it's more focused on trying to celebrate rather than criticise."

There's something that has always interested me. The fact that the whole Warrington-Runcorn New Town project is an affectionate salute to the idealistic town planning projects of the 1970s is something that absolutely comes over in the music – it's there in every beat, in every pulse of every queasy synth.

But how? How does that happen? Just how does Gordon Chapman-Fox infuse instrumental electronica with the distilled essence of Woolworths and the chlorinated pong of municipal swimming baths?

"I don't know!" he protests. "I'm the worst person to describe how I make my music. It's just what comes out of me. But what I would say is that I'm more interested in song structure than in creating experimental synth tones. It's not about the technique of synthesis for me, or about creating weird noises that I haven't heard before.

"I just find a nice sound, then I create whatever song that sound asks me to make. And I often create long pieces, then cut them down. There's a lot of editing that goes on to make it musically interesting. Lots of tracks begin life as a long jam, then become condensed and a bit more poppy."

He continues to be amazed by the success of a project that was originally intended as the cocking of a very niche musical snook. His previous musical ventures, he happily admits, rarely sold more than 30 copies to assorted friends and family. But, less than four years since this life-changing rebirth, he can now boast of an actual synth god joining the Warrington-Runcorn planning committee. Providing an exclusive remix of the album's lead single, 'A Shared Sense Of Purpose', is the mighty Vince Clarke.

"It just keeps getting bigger and bigger, and that never stops being surprising," he says, with a shake of the head. "It was astonishing to sell 300 copies of the first album. I was absolutely gobsmacked by that. So getting a remix from Vince Clarke is just, 'Aaargh, how is this happening to me?'. I've emailed him three times now, each time with trembling fingers and bated breath. I still remember watching Depeche Mode on 'Top Of The Pops' as a six-year-old and thinking, 'I love this'.

"And I've got lots of ideas and concepts for future records. Occasionally I want to do a palate cleanser, which is why the 'Building A New Town' acoustic EP came out last year. It was just about taking this unwieldy thing that is Warrington-Runcorn in a new direction, really. It can be difficult to keep things fresh, but I've got new ideas percolating that I'd like to explore."

So a sixth Warrington-Runcorn album is in the offing?

"I've more or less finished it," he smiles. "And I've been playing parts of it in my live set. In the past, I suppose I've been based in the late 1970s musical arena, but this one is probably a bit more 1981. Think OMD and Cabaret Voltaire."

And early Depeche Mode, by any chance? You can tell he's been hanging around with Vince Clarke.

"Well, he's from Basildon!" grins Gordon. "He's the original New Town synthesist, isn't he?"

Scamp has returned, and is apparently desperate for a bracing afternoon walk. So the dialogue between past and present can continue another day. For now, it's simply time for Gordon Chapman-Fox to wash up his mug, slip on a big coat and explore whatever is left of the North-West's remaining communal spaces.

'Your Community Hub' is released by Castles In Space on 24 May

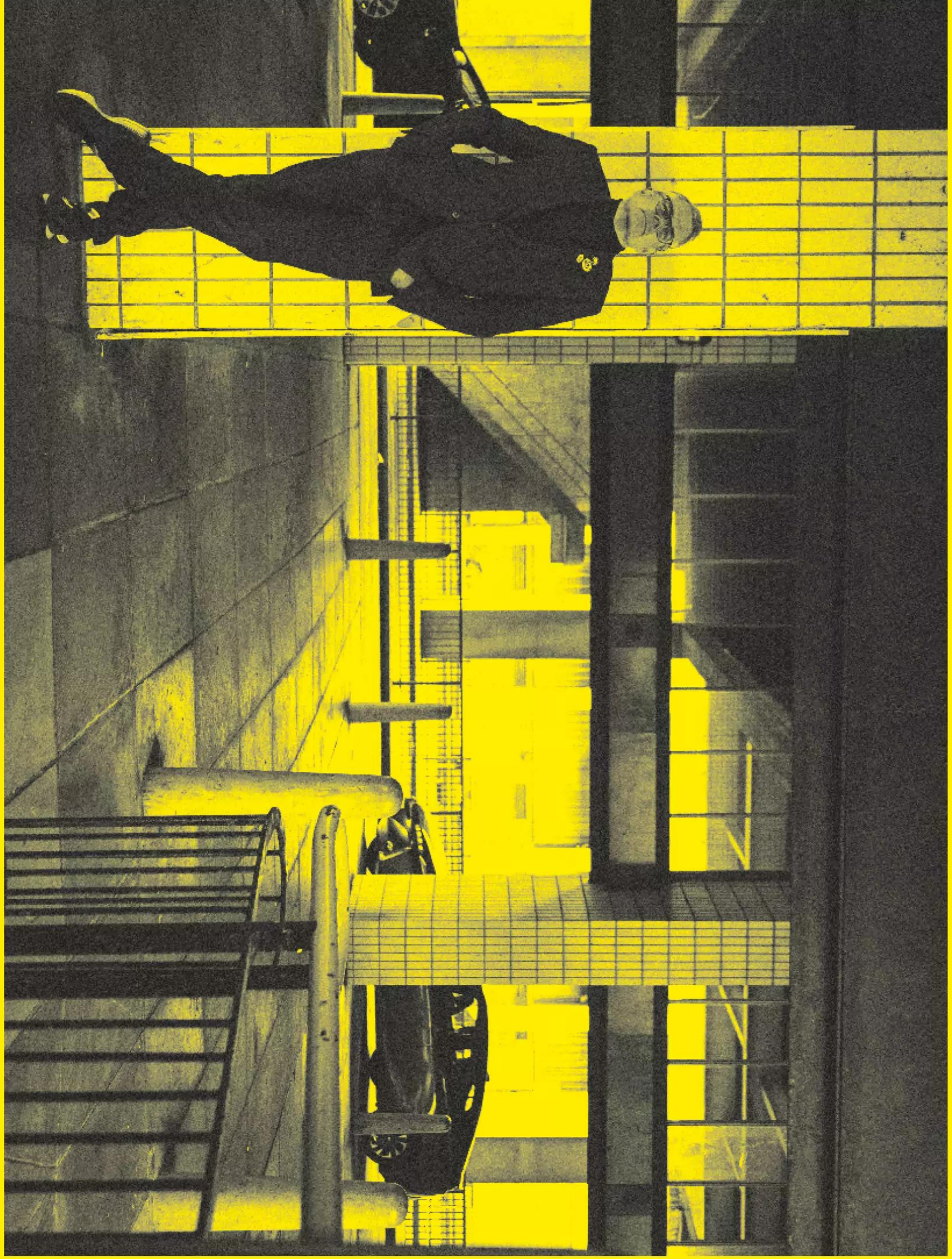


PHOTO: MARK DAVID FORD

TALKING PICTURES

BARRY ADAMSON

Barry Adamson is busier than ever. Ahead of a blistering new solo record and a string of UK live dates, the celebrated bassist reflects on setting the post-punk agenda with Magazine and his defining time with the Bad Seeds. “Bands are fucking nuts,” he says

WORDS: JONATHAN WRIGHT

By his own estimation, Barry Adamson has reached the point where new projects belong to the “autumn” of his career. Yet don’t for a moment think this means a man who started out in the immediate post-punk era with Magazine is any less creative than he once was. Far from it. As his new album ‘Cut To Black’ proves, Adamson is still searching, looking for new angles. In particular, as songs for the album came together, Adamson says he found himself “leading a little bit more than I have done before with black music and making it very pointed”.

This is, after all, an album that begins with a track called ‘The Last Words Of Sam Cooke’. With lyrics by Adamson’s writing partner Siena Barnes, the song portrays the soul legend’s 1964 motel murder “from Sam’s point of view, inside his own head”. It’s a song rooted in 1960s R&B, where poignancy and bleak humour play off each other. *“Lady, you shot me!”* declares Sam with an air of righteous indignation as he bleeds out.

“I always want to sing ‘Baby, I love you’, so it has that commercial sense if you’re not zeroed in on the words,” says Adamson. “You can kind of go, ‘Ah, I feel safe now, I know where I am’. There’s a beat and there’s a rhythm. There’s a tradition, whether it be dance music or R&B.”

But to return to the album’s title, ‘Cut To Black’ has multiple associations – black music and culture, Adamson’s personal experiences of growing up as a mixed-race boy in Manchester with a love of cinema that’s been present in his work since 1989’s solo debut, ‘Moss Side Story’, and with loss and tragic endings. ‘Cut To Black’ welcomes you in, but it never truly lets you settle.

If the first four songs work in pretty familiar ways, that soon changes. While Adamson is "very sincere about those pieces of music", the album's running order is designed to upend the expectations they create. On the fifth song, 'These Would Be Blues', Adamson sings ominously of being "A certain kind of man / With a certain kind of wound".

"I start exposing this other, deeper kind of character," he says, referring to the Oscar-nominated 2023 film based on novelist Percival Everett's 'Erasure', the story of a black professor who writes under a pseudonym, satirising the literary stereotypes of African-American fiction only to find that the book is taken at face value.

"It's a bit like in 'American Fiction' in terms of the surface being, 'Here we are, yeah, we can all boogie!'. Then you go inside a little bit more. And once that starts to happen, it's like, 'Whoa, hang on a minute, you mean there's a rich inner world being constantly derailed?'."

He's not wrong. The album moves through different emotional states and styles before concluding with 'Waiting For The End Of Time', a track that has a certain neo-soul lushness in its arrangement, but which starkly deals with grief. For Adamson, it's a way of coming back to his own soul.

"It's just purely from the guts, from the heart," he says. "I like that as a kind of closing."

It also leans into the idea of 'Cut To Black' from a different perspective, the idea of a story playing out and in some sense resolving. The notion of connecting to the past through interweaving narratives appears to run through the album. You find yourself wondering whether there's been an overspill from Adamson's 2021 memoir, 'Up Above The City, Down Beneath The Stars', but seemingly not.

"I can separate things quite well," he says of working on different projects.

Looking back at the memoir, he was happy to be "given a little bit of credit for actually being able to write a bit" and says that he's considering the idea of writing a book of short stories, "where I give my experience to the characters", as a way to dramatise chapters of his life in more recent years.

Nevertheless, writing the memoir did have a creative impact on him. Recording the album ("Very much a Todd Rundgren bedroom record"), he found himself worrying less about what other people might think than he had in previous years.

"On 'Cut To Black', it was almost like something had been freed up," says Adamson. "It sounds a little bit… picturesque, but it's almost like the chains had been broken in terms of the way I could look at the world."

However these two projects might have played off each other, the memoir is revealing, detailing the abuse Adamson suffered as a kid and his childhood experience of Ollier disease, a skeletal disorder that meant he had to be encased in plaster to reset his hips.

It also offers first-hand insights into two important bands of the past 50 years – Magazine, and Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds. While he jokes that he sounds like "an old fogey" when talking about punk and the bleakness of Britain in the mid-to-late 1970s, meeting Howard Devoto changed the trajectory of Adamson's life.

"You were kind of pulled along," he says of punk. "It was almost like, 'I've got to go. I'm sorry, I've got to go to this'. And I did exactly that. I was chiselling out a career as a designer or an architect or something like that, but I just dropped everything. 'Come now!' 'But I can't play anything.' 'Doesn't matter.' All this freedom. You don't need a grade, or whatever. You don't need to be able to play 'Stairway To Heaven' anymore. You can thrash out this noise and get on board. That was the bus I jumped on."

As a group, Magazine drove punk somewhere new, and perhaps even invented post-punk.

"Within a couple of months, you were progressing from three chords to four," jokes Adamson.

BARRY ADAMSON

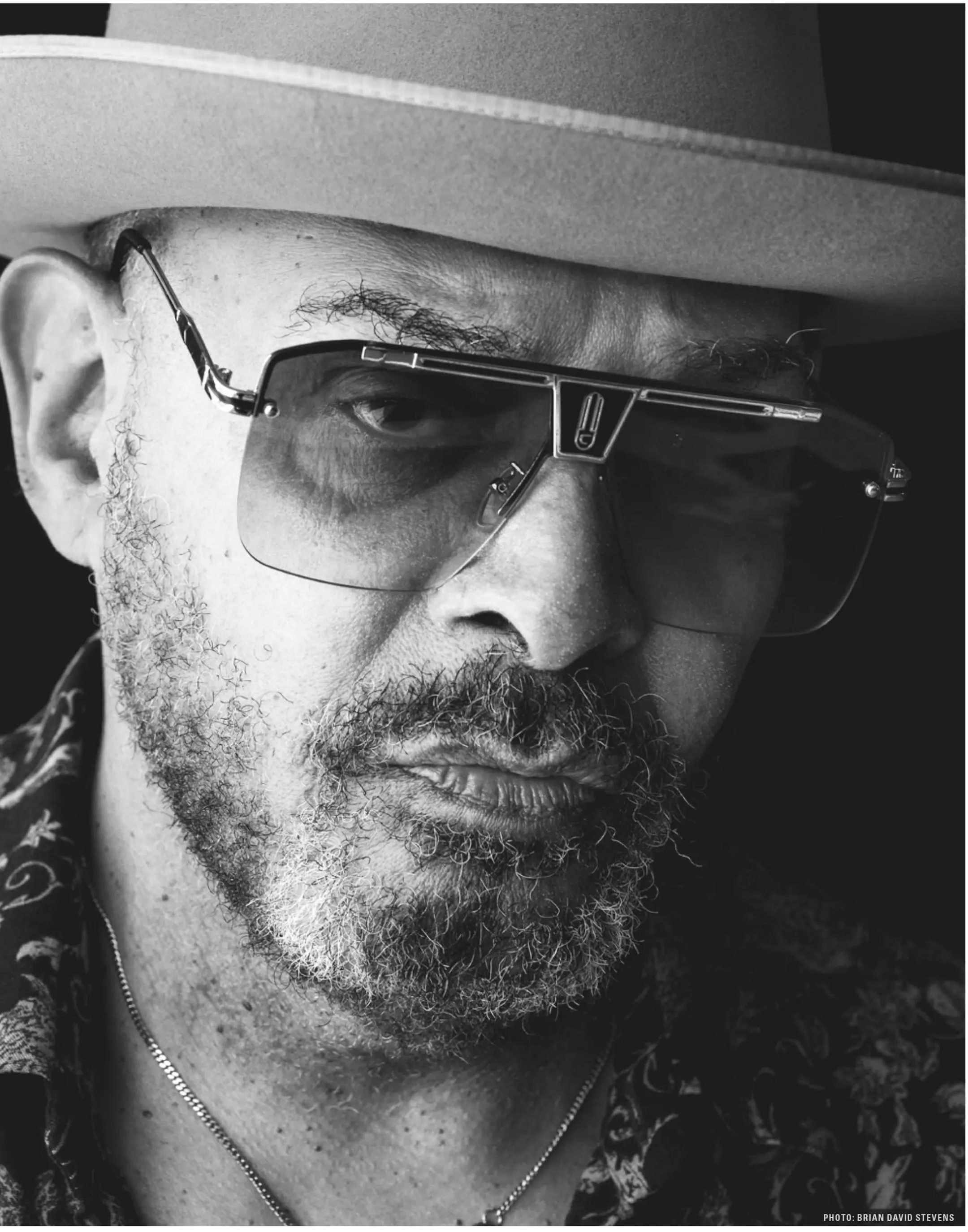


PHOTO: BRIAN DAVID STEVENS

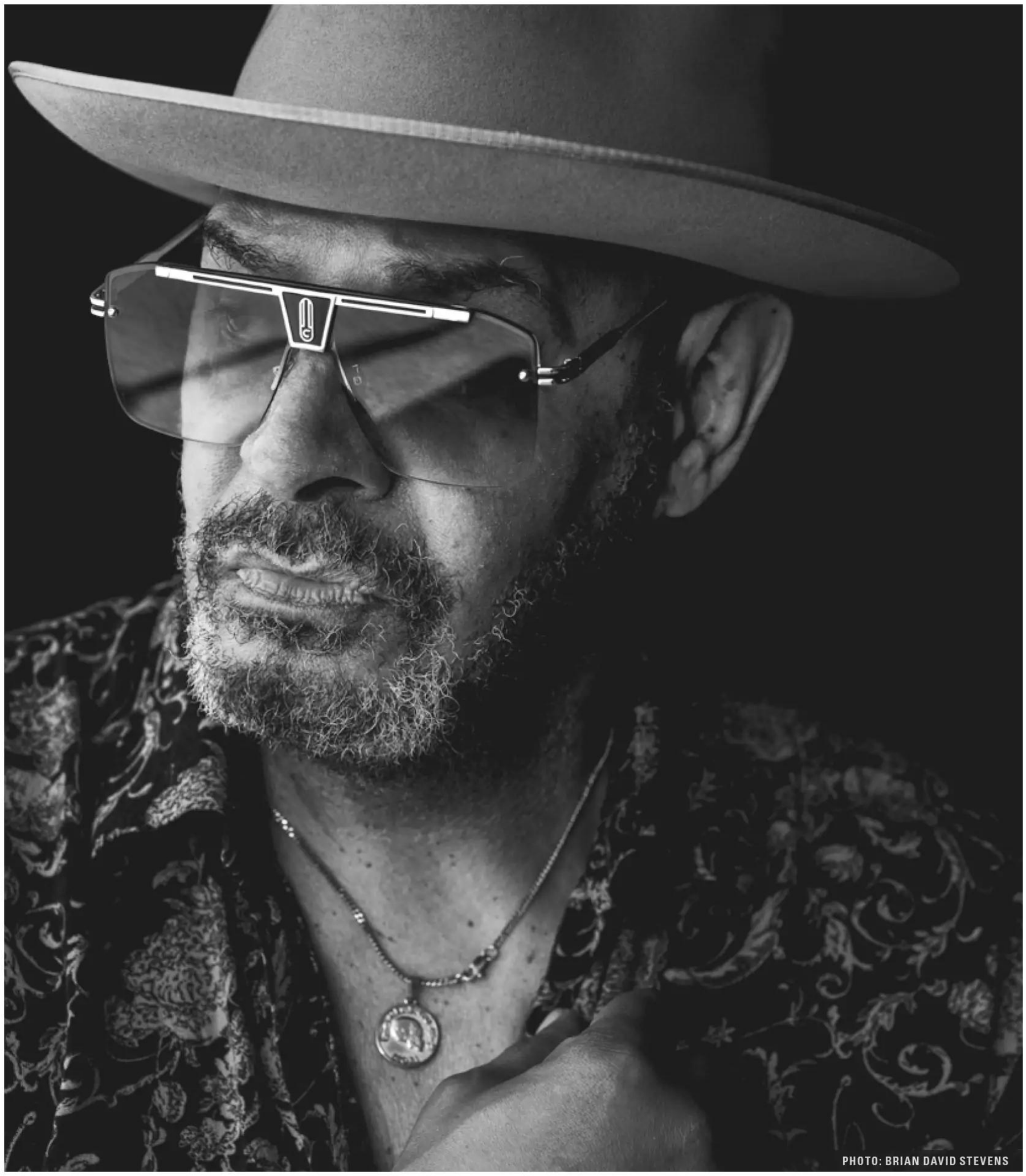


PHOTO: BRIAN DAVID STEVENS

If this was a fertile time professionally, personally it exacted a high price, as Adamson gradually developed a heroin habit. An eerie, watchful figure called The Vulture appears in the book, a device that Adamson uses to help show exactly how out of control he was before he finally got clean. In the circumstances, running with The Birthday Party in London was probably asking for even more trouble.

"I saw it as having a similar energy, if you like, to the whole punk movement," says Adamson. "I was pretty much obsessed with The Pop Group. I thought they were *it*. Then The Birthday Party came along and they had a similar energy – quite chaotic but strangely articulate."

Only much later did he learn that Nick Cave was also obsessed with Mark Stewart and co, especially the 'We Are All Prostitutes' single. As The Birthday Party imploded, Adamson went from "hanger-on" to being a member of the Bad Seeds in the mid-1980s. Subsequently, he occasionally worked with Cave again. Considering the daunting aura the band exudes, what is it that truly makes someone a Bad Seed?

"I think part of it is like… imagine you go and play for Manchester United, and you're either a Manchester United player, or you're not – it very soon becomes apparent if you're not," says Adamson, adding that you have to become a Bad Seed in "an anthropological way" and learn to wear the band's equivalent of a football kit – the suit.

"Bands are fucking nuts. It's probably why I'm not in one. Because there's all this coding, all this unspoken stuff and hierarchy. But yeah, you become a Bad Seed and then you stop being a Bad Seed and find a horse's head when you go to sleep at night…"

As well as returning to the Bad Seeds, Adamson also performed again with a reconstituted Magazine, where nothing had really changed.

"I felt like a Brian Eno-type person going back to Roxy Music," he says. "Everyone is like they are, that's the thing."

A key moment in Adamson becoming a solo artist occurred at London's Scala, the scuzzy cinema located in a pre-gentrified King's Cross, which was then a den of sex workers and dealers, street people and freaks. The cinema specialised in showing cult movies, often at all-night screenings. Here, Adamson saw Otto Preminger's 1955 noir thriller 'The Man With The Golden Arm', starring Frank Sinatra as drug addict Frankie Machine, and was fascinated by Elmer Bernstein's jazz-infused soundtrack. At the time, film music was taken less seriously than today.

"You had to dress in a mac and go to a special part of the record store to get your fix," jokes Adamson. "'Put these in a brown paper bag, please!'"

But others shared his interest. FM "Mufti" Einheit of Einstürzende Neubauten gave Adamson a cassette featuring tracks by composers such as Bernard Herrmann, Quincy Jones and Ennio Morricone.

"The tracks all kind of ran together, and I just thought, 'That's interesting, how the mood shifts'."

How would it be, thought Adamson, to write in this way? The notion of actually working in cinema came into focus, which in turn led to 'Moss Side Story', the soundtrack to an imaginary film noir.

"Even though there wasn't a film, I thought that at least I can put people in the atmospheric world that I'm trying to talk about," he says, referring to a black-and-white realm heavily influenced by his Manchester childhood. "And I guess that's been my role ever since."

Over the years, Adamson has contributed to films by such luminaries as Oliver Stone, Danny Boyle, Derek Jarman and David Lynch. While working with Lynch on the soundtrack to 'Lost Highway', Adamson was on crutches.

"David did once get on his knees and tie my shoelace," he remembers. "He announced to everyone, 'I'm tying Barry Adamson's shoelace!'."

Back in the present, things have come full circle in that Adamson's latest soundtrack is for 'Scala!!! Or, The Incredibly Strange Rise And Fall Of The World's Wildest Cinema And How It Influenced A Mixed-Up Generation Of Weirdos And Misfits', the acclaimed documentary about London's hugely influential independent cinema.

It explores how the Scala was, in the words of cult film director John Waters, "a country club for criminals and lunatics and people that were high" through the Thatcher years. First-time filmmaker Ali Catterall, co-director with Jane Giles, says that Adamson – also interviewed in the film – is part of the "connective tissue" of the Scala's story.

"How do you tell a Bad Seed that you're not happy with some of the things he's done?" he laughs about giving Adamson notes. "You just feel like a twat!"

Catterall, incidentally, has synaesthesia, which manifests as a perceptual association between music and colour. He describes Adamson's music as "classically black and white, but it's shot through with quite gritty neon reds and greens, like strobes".

Which is actually as good a description of Adamson's work as you'll find. For his part, Adamson values Catterall's enthusiasm, adding that some directors don't engage with music until the producer forces them to do so.

"Funnily enough, I never ended up getting those jobs," he says of such scenarios. "Because I imagine they think I have a shitty attitude."

Not true, but Barry Adamson does possess a hard-won sense of his own worth. When he was younger, his confidence was very low. Today, while he still has moments of doubt, he's much more assured and certain of who he is.

"I generally feel like I'm on a trajectory to just create and keep on creating. It's what I wanted to do and that's what I'm doing now."

However we get there, we're all like who we are. Cut to black.

'Cut To Black' is out now on Barry Adamson Inc. The 'Scala!!!' Blu-ray is also out now, with the soundtrack set to be released by Mute later this year

LOVE PARADE

Cosmically lush, gently kaleidoscopic and swirling with mystic "wyrd folk", Jane Weaver is back with a compelling and groovily seductive new work that truly hits the heights

WORDS: SHARON O'CONNELL
PICTURES: NIC CHAPMAN

Most likely, any artist with a new album in their sights wants the process to be simpler, quicker and involve significantly less deliberation next time around. Why would they not? So it was for Liverpudlian singer, songwriter and producer Jane Weaver. However, her hope for the follow-up to 2021's 'Flock' went beyond operational efficiency – at its heart was the urge to "do something new and different", which necessarily involved making big changes to her established MO. Fate played a part, too, if not always sensitively.

Her latest record, 'Love In Constant Spectacle', took shape while Weaver and her band were on tour in the US, first in November 2022 and then in March last year. Speaking from her home in Stockport, she reveals that to keep costs down (and because she wasn't drinking) she did the lion's share of the driving, including a 12-hour stretch south from Seattle on the famously scenic Route 1, which takes in Big Sur.

"That was amazing!" she says. "As the sun was setting at one point, Matt from the band just went, 'Sea lions!'. There was a colony on the coast so we got out of the car and were running around – that was the first trip. Then we went back and played a lot of shows at SXSW. We continued by going to Pappy & Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, near Joshua Tree in the middle of the desert, then to LA and up the coast again. There were all these magical moments when we were driving."

In whatever downtime she could grab, Weaver wrote a lot ("I had so many words"), inspired by the physical landscape, its vastness and the absorptive pleasure that travelling can bring, especially if Harold Budd and Vangelis are along for the ride. However, it was also a very difficult time emotionally, due to her father's grave illness and the anticipatory grief of his death. As it turned out, though, intense emotional experiences that seem mutually exclusive aren't necessarily so.

"There's that thing where you're walking alongside a serious situation," explains Weaver. "But you still have to work, you've still got a family, so it seeps into whatever you're doing. It was quite an emotionally charged situation for a number of years. Every time I'd go away, I'd be worrying that something would happen. It was quite stressful in that I had this constant anxiety alongside what I was doing, but music is therapeutic and it did provide me with some comfort.

"Like, when I was in America driving through the desert and listening to Harold Budd – wow. You can still have things happen in your life that are nice, without feeling guilty about the parallel, serious things going on."

Those "serious things" have inevitably made their mark on 'Love In Constant Spectacle', although not explicitly. It's far from a gloomy record – in fact, it's a warmly enveloping, groovily seductive and dreamy set emphasising the importance of seizing small joys while also acknowledging the sadness of life's inevitable losses. There are faint echoes of Broadcast, Stereolab and early Goldfrapp, while some songs suggest Gruff Rhys and Cate Le Bon as kindred spirits. The album's binding agent is the sensual melancholy of Weaver's voice.

As the title suggests, the singer is a believer in the wonders of the universe as a source of uplift and delight, if we only bother to take note. Elements of cosmology, folklore and theosophy have long swirled in her mix, from the wyrd/acid folk of 2010's 'The Fallen By Watch Bird' to the space rock-inspired 'The Silver Globe' (2014), the mix of interstellar disco and kosmische that is 'Modern Kosmology' (2017) and, on 'Flock', the euphoric-pop repurposing of the Bee Gees and Daryl Hall & John Oates.

However, Weaver's own emotions have been harder to parse, subsumed as they very often are by the slightly mysterious nature of her music. On the new LP, although there are no obvious narratives and the lyrics are allusive, her presence is more strongly felt because the music is less fulsome.

She credits producer John Parish with that particular change. Although she has previously drawn from her circle of friends and intimates (including husband and DJ/Twisted Nerve label co-founder, Andy Votel) for various co-production tasks, 'Love In Constant Spectacle' is the first time Weaver has worked with a producer for an entire album – and in a residential pro studio, too. She knew that if she wanted to make a different kind of record with 'Love In Constant Spectacle', she would have to cut back on the multilayering that she loves so much.

"Even though John produces a great deal of stuff which is quite powerful and big, you can hear a lot of the instrumentation in the mix. Also, I wanted to do something which was easier to play live, so if we wanted to experiment live or build on it, we could, rather than just immediately have to represent a large collage of sounds."

Inevitably, making these changes involved the occasional challenge.

"In some of it the vocals are quite loud, and I'm a bit like, 'Aargh!', because normally I'd have swamped them with a lot of vocal effects. There are some effects on there and interesting tape loops, but I think I over-egg the pudding sometimes. If it's just me, I tend to turn it up to 11. There's a lot more clarity and simplicity in what John does."

Working with Parish helped Weaver achieve what she wanted in another way too. His window of availability meant she had to forego her usual practice of "chipping away" at a record in the Eve studio 10 minutes from her house as and when time and/or mood permitted. Instead, she booked a three-week block at the storied Rockfield Studios in Monmouthshire.

"I thought, 'Well, everybody else does it, why can't I?'. Me wanting to produce something quite differently was not only in the writing but also in the studio process. It was quite scary, really, but that's why I wanted to work with a producer to help me get it over the line, because there are so many decisions to make when you're doing a record that sometimes you do need help along the way."

Rockfield is Parish's preferred studio, so he's often recorded there, but Weaver had long been drawn to it because Hawkwind (she's still a big fan) co-founder Dave Brock did a lot of work in it down the years.

"It's a wonderful space and really down to earth. It's not intimidating at all, and I'm so glad we went there".

Considering the emotional backdrop to the writing of 'Love In Constant Spectacle', it's no surprise that Weaver needed a lyrical workaround to create some distance in order to avoid feeling exposed by her songs.

To that end, she would form small vignettes in her head then imagine other people in those situations, rather than herself. Taking her cue from non-English movie subtitles, where meaning is necessarily condensed, she also made her ideas simpler using TextEdit and Google Translate to flip the lyrics back and forth between English and other languages, creating fresh, slightly "off" and often poetic expressions in the process.

Randomising isn't a new technique – artists including David Bowie, Van Morrison, Broadcast's Trish Keenan, and Jessica Pratt have used various methods to their own lyrical ends – but it was new to Weaver.

"The beautiful thing about language is that, depending on where you start, where you end up and where you come back to, it can be quite different," she reasons. "The same sentence, retranslated, can come back in English in a completely different way. Sometimes it sounds more poignant, more dramatic or more simple, so it was just an interesting way for me to imagine that these lyrics were like subtitles to things that were going on."

Despite its potential for generating lyric stems of intriguing oddness, Weaver is unlikely to ever use AI.

"It's fine as a tool, but I just wouldn't feel like I'd done enough work on my words. I did do a lot of writing, cut and paste in TextEdit – that kind of thing. Not cutting things out but just switching them around. I did feel like I had to work the dough [laughs]."

Talk of lyrics turns naturally to poetry, which is songwriting kindling for so many artists, especially those starting out. Weaver, who wrote a book of fairy tales as a companion to 'The Fallen By Watch Bird' and is hoping to do something similar again, admits she'd love to do more standalone writing, including poetry, but isn't sure she has the confidence.

Recently, her creativity went whizzing off down a visual side road. Before she became a musician with a record deal, Weaver completed a foundation course in fine art, with the intention of studying fashion and art in Brighton. When music took over her life, that part was left behind, but in the last six months she's been doing an art course at night school to reconnect.

Her enthusiasm for creativity stretches back to childhood and rather unexpectedly, to Disney and the church.

"I was really into art and singing hymns, because I was raised Catholic," she says. "My brother and I had to go to Catholic mass, Catholic schools… everything. Still now, I think some hymns are really beautiful – and church choirs. When I'm away, I don't 'go to church', but I go and see churches and I don't care what denomination they are, obviously. I think choirs and choral voices echoing in church were quite impactful on me as a young person.

"I remember 'Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs' and the scenes when the flowers would sing together, stuff like that. That essence of Disney had an impact on me, I think, because when I hear that kind of thing now – those vintage, choral Disney vocals – it really takes me back.

"The next thing was Kate Bush when I was five or six," she recalls. "Again, very otherworldly. I was like, 'Who *is* this dancing and singing, who looks like the coolest big sister anybody could ever have and sounds like a princess?'. All the costumes and the glitter, the glam and the hair – I think that for so many people in the UK at the time, watching 'Top Of The Pops' and seeing Kate Bush was just like, 'Wow!'."

Given that the sound/image pairing made such an impression on Jane Weaver early on, it's no surprise that there's always been a strong visual element in her recordings, from the generally suggestive, achieved via multilayered production, to the very specific.

The illustration on the back of 'The Fallen By Watch Bird' was inspired by the 1976 Czech film 'Malá Mořská Víla' and drew Weaver into the fairytale realm, while the life and pioneering works of the Swedish abstract painter Hilma Af Klint inspired 'H>A>K', a track on 'Modern Kosmology'. And in 2019, working with collaborators Peter Philipson and Raz Ullah as Fenella, she recorded an alternative score for a cult animation classic from Hungary called 'Fehérlófia'.

Although songcraft constitutes most of Weaver's output to date, she's not committed to it above and beyond everything else. In fact, she's recently been working on a new project which she says "has a completely different feeling to it".

"There are some songs but it's more atmospheric – like a score with songs in it," she explains. "It's just one of those things I've been wanting to do for a good number of years and I needed to commit to starting it. It's hopefully going to be out next year or maybe the year after."

Clearly, Weaver's mind is a fizzing wellspring of plans and ideas, but making art is about more than personal satisfaction for her.

"I feel like I've got no choice. I will always try to be creative because it's just the way I want to be, but I think art and creativity – whether it's writing, painting or whatever – is a great universal thing. Outside of all the terrible things that go on in the world, artistic creations are a power – they really are. They're a remedy and a therapy."

'Love In Constant Spectacle' is out now on Fire

RIDE ON TIME

Together for eight years, apart for 19, and then back together for another 10. Life in Ride has often been a rollercoaster, but the band's new album 'Interplay' is a synth-heavy triumph

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: CAL MCINTYRE

"I love the word 'widescreen'," exclaims Ride's Mark Gardener. "Ennio Morricone is a god to me. And John Barry. And Antônio Pinto. And Hans Zimmer. All the soundtrack boys!"

All four band members are in a smiley, chipper mood. And "widescreen"? Possibly the perfect epithet for their new album, 'Interplay'. It's 36 years since they formed as students at the Oxfordshire School of Art and Design, and 28 years since a mid-Britpop split that veered dangerously close to messy. But in the thrilling decade since their 2014 reformation, they have sounded utterly rejuvenated.

'Interplay' is their third album since the reunion, and – while they've never been averse to a spot of electronic dabbling – its lavish use of vintage synth sounds has lent the band an impressively cinematic quality.

"We gave ourselves the challenge of going into this album with no content whatsoever," says drummer Laurence "Loz" Colbert. "We deliberately tried to start by jamming in the studio. And we took that as far as we could, but it began to go almost the wrong way. So just as things were starting to turn a bit sour, we opened it up for everyone to bring in demos. And that's when we got tracks like 'I Came To See The Wreck' and 'Sunrise Chaser'. And one of the tracks I brought in was 'Last Night I Went Somewhere To Dream'.

It was this song, the album's press release boldly proclaims, that was the catalyst for a change of mood.

The truly beautiful 1980s touches of 'Last Night I Went Somewhere To Dream' – woozy Depeche Mode synths paired with stadium-filling guitars – seem to have spread rather delightfully around the rest of the album. Was the track really the nudge that Ride needed to connect with their inner U2?

"I think it was the shuffly beat!" smiles Andy Bell. "But I wouldn't say it was that overt. We started talking about those kinds of tunes but without saying, 'This could be the direction for the album'. It was more, 'Do you remember how we used to fucking love 'The Unforgettable Fire'?'.

"We put it on one day, in the studio. The strings, and that lovely Brian Eno production… we applied some of that stuff to 'Sunrise Chaser'. So little bits crept in, but at that stage it wasn't, 'Let's have an 80s pop concept, guys!'."

The jamming sessions and the bulk of recording took place at Mark Gardener's own OX4 Sound studio in Oxfordshire, but Mark himself chuckles at the idea of Bono-based bonding sessions.

"Maybe the guys were doing all that while I was mic-ing stuff up or doing the hoovering!" he laughs. "I love 'The Unforgettable Fire' and 'The Joshua Tree' too, but I was engineering as well as being the guy in the band, so while the others were sitting around getting inspired, I was probably on the phone to management saying, 'It's time for an engineer to come and help, because I've had enough now!'."

The album was completed at Vada Studios, a residential complex near Stratford-upon-Avon.

"John Lydon had been there the week before," notes deadpan bassist Steve Queralt. "So I slept in his bed."

And had the erstwhile "Rotten" left anything lying around? Earplugs? A half-empty tub of hair gel in the bedside cabinet?

"No," says Steve. "But I didn't do the 'Four In A Bed' thing where they go round looking for pubic hairs."

There are blank stares from all quarters.

"Have you never seen that programme?" he asks. "It's on Channel 4. People who own guest houses stay in each other's hotels. It's a really bitchy show, and the first thing they do is put on white gloves and go around looking for dirt. 'This is disgusting! There's a pubic hair in the toilet!'."

"That is the most Channel 4 programme ever," says Andy.

Five interminable, difficult years have passed since their 2019 album 'This Is Not A Safe Place'. The world, as Cate Blanchett points out in the first 'Lord Of The Rings' film, has changed. I feel it in the water. I smell it in the air. Has 'Interplay' been a tricky album to make in such tumultuous times?

"It has," says Steve. "We went into Mark's studio at the back end of the pandemic, whenever the government would allow us. Three lots of one-week sessions. Hanging over us at the time was a huge legal affair that had been brewing for a couple of years – that was coming to a head. And because it was the pandemic, the money was running out. The band couldn't actually do anything, so we were relying on other jobs or savings. It wasn't the perfect environment to work in."

"Some of the lyrics allude slightly to those things," says Andy. "It's quite an introspective-sounding record. With the last album, I'd recently been to an exhibition about Jean-Michel Basquiat, and that was a big inspiration for the songwriting. But this time, everyone was looking inwards."

Some of the songwriting, I suggest, goes a little beyond the benignly introspective. Take 'Monaco' – "Broken by this country / We get smashed into pieces / Better take these pills / 'Cause everything's for sale." Is this also an album coming from a rather pissed-off place?

"Yes!" replies Mark. "I'm in a band, which pays OK but not that well any more, and like a lot of people I'm also a small business owner. And it's just so hard to keep it all alive. Through the pandemic, and then into the energy crisis… it's been madness. I'm in my early 50s now, and I'm having to work so many long hours."

Melancholy and righteous indignation? It's a potent combination, and the release of a third belting Ride album in a row makes that 19-year gap all the more frustrating. Is there a part of them that hankers for a parallel universe version of Ride? An alternate reality where they stayed together between 1996 and 2014 and 'Interplay' is their 17th studio album?

"The gap is the secret of our success!" smiles Andy. "For any bands out there who are struggling, I'd say take 19 years out. It definitely helps with the chemistry."

Andy spent a huge chunk of the interim years as a member of Oasis, of course, and Mark and Loz formed late 1990s psych band The Animalhouse, but the experience was short-lived.

"I moved to rural France in about 2000," says Mark. "Totally dejected. Not with music itself, but with the way the whole industry had changed. So I worked in a walnut orchard. Listening over and over to Hans Zimmer's soundtrack to 'The Thin Red Line' – that was the best therapy! I recommend anyone who's been in a band to have that experience. Work in a walnut orchard for a few months while listening to Hans Zimmer."

Meanwhile, Steve recounts a particularly telling moment from the late 1990s. Making ends meet by working in the Oxford branch of Habitat, his blood ran cold when Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke walked into the store, keen to purchase a new sofa.

"That was a really awkward moment," grimaces Steve. "There was me, a year out of Ride, and I had to get a job because the money had run out. And then Thom Yorke walked in. My career was over, and his was just blooming. We clocked each other, had the briefest of conversations about what he wanted to buy, then he left."

"'The most expensive sofa in the shop, please!'," laughs Andy.

"He didn't buy it!" exclaims Steve. "And that was actually my *second* awkward conversation with Thom Yorke. The first one was on the way to a festival in Sweden. The bus picked both bands up from the airport and then stopped at a service station. And I tried to talk to him about crisps, but he just wasn't interested. I mean, who doesn't want to talk about crisps?"

"So, if Radiohead were a packet of crisps, what flavour would they be?" begins Loz.

"Worcester Sauce," says Mark in an instant. "I really like them, but they're not mainstream."

"Kettle Chips, lightly salted," says Steve. "One of my favourite crisps for one of my favourite bands."

We're doing this, are we? Really? Go on then, what about Ride?

"Cheesy Wotsits," says Steve.

"They're too mainstream," protests Andy. "We're more of a connoisseur's choice. I'd say something you can't readily get. Like Nik Naks."

"Does anybody remember baked bean-flavoured crisps?" asks Steve. "My dad used to buy them for me when I was about five."

Andy is frowning now.

"I won't have those anywhere near Ride's legacy," he grumbles.

It's a typical Ride conversation. For all the grandiose sonic cathedrals of sound they have created over the decades, they are endearingly funny and down-to-earth. So when they meet now as relaxed 50-somethings, can they still recapture the delights of being four daft teenagers at art college in 1980s Oxford?

"Yeah, those are the great moments," says Loz. "When it just gets back to the four of us having a laugh together."

"We're just slightly more haggard teenagers now!" grins Mark. "But there is an element of that, for sure. There's a weird chemistry that happens with us. It's good, and I think we keep each other on our game quite well."

They begin reminiscing delightfully. About the emergency food parcels that Mark's mum once delivered to their shared student house ("What *is* a rissole?" asks Steve, still baffled decades later), and about Big Spiderback, the reggae covers band that Steve and Andy formed between college deadlines. Their speciality? A UB40-style cover of Barbra Streisand's 'Woman In Love'. They're clearly now at ease in each other's company, but how do they view their own back catalogue? Can they ever light a pipe and slip on a bit of vintage Ride for pleasure?

"Once I've recorded an album, I can't really listen to it," says Loz. "That definitely happened with [1990 debut] 'Nowhere'. I didn't touch it for years. But then you come back later and think, 'Oh, this is quite good, really'. You've removed yourself from the process and can just listen to it as music. So if I stick to doing that, and don't overdo things too soon, I can be quite proud of the albums."

"My go-to would be 'Nowhere' or [1992 album] 'Going Blank Again'," says Andy. "'Nowhere' is a bit more difficult when my vocals go out of tune, but I can get into the general sound and the cool early songs."

In the run-up to our conversation, I reveal, I've listened to all of Ride's seven studio albums in order, one after the other. It's an approach the band themselves seem to regard as an unnecessary feat of human endurance. And the album that really surprised me was the one they've come close to disowning in the past. In 1994, with relationships becoming frazzled all round, they produced 'Carnival Of Light', a genuinely lovely collection of psychedelic pop gems.

"End of call!" says Loz, shaking his head sadly. "It's been nice chatting to you, Bob…"

Really? I know that it was a traumatic time for Ride, but honestly – the songs are great.

"It just didn't feel as focused as some of the other albums," he continues. "I'm not going to completely trash it – I think it has some great stuff and there were some good moments for us. But it just felt like we weren't really pushing ourselves. We were all a bit comfortable, and possibly not saying 'Is this actually any good?'. It's a bit loose."

"We didn't stay in our lane," says Steve ruefully. "And we thought we could do something that clearly we couldn't."

Isn't it nice though, as a band, to branch out and try different things?

"Yeah, but within a certain realm," he says. "We can't stray too far."

"We've now kind of set ourselves up in a lane that's broad enough to experiment," adds Andy. "But still be good!"

We discuss their favourite electronic influences. Andy Bell cites Harald Grosskopf's 1980 album 'Synthesist', and Mark Gardener waxes lyrical about Boards Of Canada's 'Dayvan Cowboy'. Steve Queralt plumps for Vangelis' 1973 soundtrack to 'L'Apocalypse Des Animaux', while Loz Colbert nominates Autechre's intense 1993 debut 'Incunabula'. He also credits Martin Hannett's work with Joy Division as a major influence on Ride's latest sonic palette.

"There are a lot of electronic elements to this album," he says. "The heart of it is definitely four people in a room playing live, but it's also been developed, and there's an interplay with all the electronic parts. That's the bit that's going to be a challenge when we play live. Do we take somebody with us that plays keyboards?"

"We should all come onstage with four keyboards," says Andy. "That would be amazing."

"As long as they're all keytars," says Steve.

Mark, meanwhile, is still pondering his favourite Ride album – and comes to a heart-warming conclusion.

"It's 'Interplay'," he says. "I think we've hit heights that I always thought we were capable of. Things on the early albums have always niggled me, but this one doesn't. It's like a fresh, sonic blood transfusion, and it feels really good to play these songs."

'Interplay' is out now on Wichita Recordings

TOMORROW'S WORLD

As the 20th century made way for the 21st, Simon Reynolds began to identify a rather big problem with our culture. The eminent music critic put his myriad conclusions into 2011's epic 'Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction To Its Own Past', where he saw the pop age eating itself. Suddenly everything "new" seemed to be either rehashed or reissued. Bands would reform to play classic albums for silly money while the burgeoning internet offered up a feeding frenzy of the bygone and "vintage". The future, at that moment, looked only concerned with its history.

So it's a relief to discover that his latest book, 'Futuromania: Electronic Dreams, Desiring Machines & Tomorrow's Music Today', is a kind of antidote to the pessimism of 'Retromania'.

A compendium of collected essays from his own music journalism, it covers the last 50 or so years of electronic music in thrilling and often dizzying detail. Some articles date back to Reynolds' early days at Melody Maker, where he began in 1986, then move chronologically through Tangerine Dream, Giorgio Moroder and Kraftwerk, the "hardcore continuum" of acid house, jungle and gabba, and on to more modern phenomena like Auto-Tune and Melodyne.

"It's not really the sequel to 'Retromania', it's sort of a relative of that book," says Reynolds, speaking from his home in California. "And it's for the kind of person who, like me, needs to be excited by future music, from the late 70s onwards. The kind of person who would have certainly been disappointed by the retro-ness of the first decade of the 2000s, where I felt very overwhelmed by retro and was compelled to write that 'disappointed' book.

"So 'Futuromania' is the 'excited' book – the euphoric excitement about things that seem to be new and almost beamed in from the future. A glimpse of how music will be going forward."

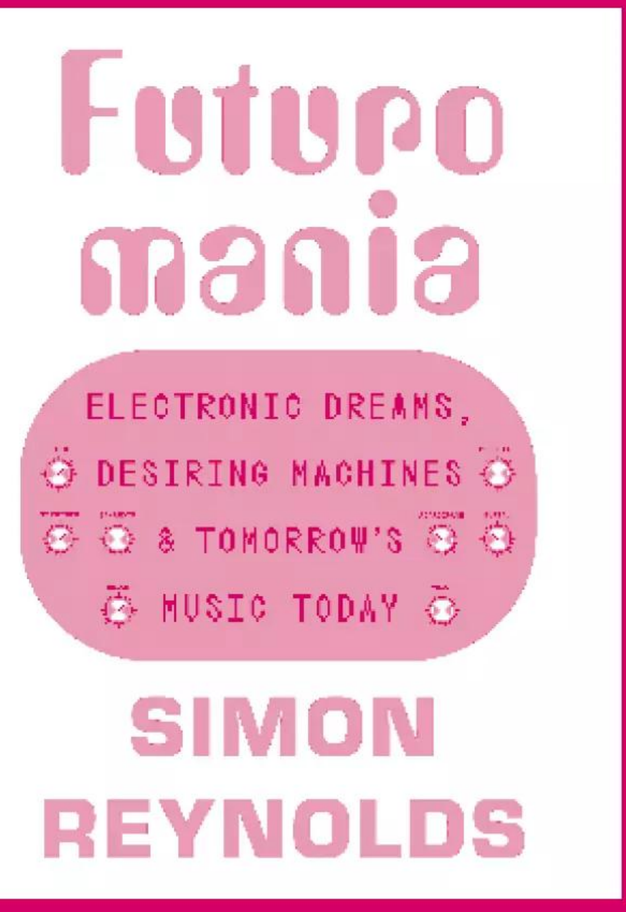
As well as the genres covered, 'Futuromania' is also a book about individuals – those maverick producers and innovators who incrementally change the world from their hitherto uncelebrated nooks and crannies.

"Yeah," says Reynolds. "People like Gerald [Gerald Simpson, aka A Guy Called Gerald], Rob Haigh of Omni Trio, the footwork artist Jlin – although she's transcended footwork – and even Florian Schneider."

PHOTO: JOY PRESS

From Kraftwerk to Auto-Tune via a range of scenes, subcultures, technologies and sci-fi backdrops, Simon Reynolds' latest book 'Futuromania' looks at the impact of "machine music" from the 1970s to the present day

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN



When Schneider died in 2020, Reynolds penned an obituary for NPR (National Public Radio, the US non-profit media organisation) which was written from Schneider's point of view, as opposed to that of his former Kraftwerk partner Ralf Hütter.

"Because he gets a bit eclipsed by Ralf, who all the way through seems like the more dominant figure," argues Reynolds. "But actually, Florian was very important at certain junctures and especially early on. And there's a whole phase of Kraftwerk when the main instrument is the flute, which I think is just really funny."

During the transition between 'Autobahn' and 'Radio-Activity', the four robots would be in place and everything going forward would be electronic. The band, too, sold the illusion of automatons making music free from any human interference, helping to give the genre its austere and impersonal aura.

Reynolds has spent a career seeking out the humans hiding behind the machines – and perhaps most notably with his dispatches from the frontline of jungle in the 1990s. Certainly that was the musical explosion he says he became most enthused about.

"When I was younger, I read a lot of theory books and I was very intoxicated with the idea of electronic music in this kind of depersonalised way, where the machines have taken over. Now I have this more humanistic viewpoint, where humans made the machines in the first place and there's nothing that comes out of the machine that isn't made by human decisions. Even the most abstract, minimal, robotic dance tune with just a beat or a weird sound only really has meaning when there's a crowd of humans dancing to it. That's what it's made for."

There's a nice moment in the book where Reynolds admits to shedding a tear listening to Kraftwerk, enforcing the idea of an emotional stimulus-response with electronic sound.

"I was on the Autobahn," he tells me. "I was actually doing a reading with my translator in Germany who had booked these gigs around the country. And so we went in a little car up and down the Autobahn at a particularly cold time of year. My translator actually hates krautrock, but she obligingly let me play the tape I'd made in advance with Neu!, Kraftwerk and motorik kinds of things, because I'm going to be in an actual motorik situation on the Autobahn.

"So I'm listening while she's muttering about 'crap fucking hippies', and I was overcome with emotion, because it's very uplifting music and then to actually hear it on the Autobahn while looking at meadows and wind turbines was just really delicious. I actually teared up and was a bit embarrassed. I had to stare out of the window."

Although the human interest side motivates Reynolds, he's never afraid to go into detail regarding the technical aspects, and the fine balance that he achieves incorporating both is one of the reasons he's such a compelling writer. The chapter on Auto-Tune, for instance. Like it or not, it's one of the dominant tools of 21st century pop so far.

"That was the one where I really tried to get to grips with the technology," he says. "I still don't think I fully understand what Andy Hildebrand did, but I have an idea. I actually watched loads and loads of YouTube tutorials on how to use Auto-Tune and Melodyne – a vocal design thing that I became fascinated with."

AI is conspicuous by its absence, but there is a good reason for this. An earlier version of 'Futuromania' published in Italy carried a piece about AI, although things have moved on a lot since it was written.

"I did have an essay in there that mentioned AI, and I expressed this very sceptical viewpoint about it," admits Simon Reynolds. "I was thinking of including it in this British version, but I felt it had probably been overtaken by events, and while my own scepticism might have been justified when I wrote that essay, I wasn't at all certain.

"It was only a year ago that I wrote a piece asking if ChatGPT could do my job. I was very confident that AI machine-learning could never do what a music critic does. But I have to say, I'm less confident now."

'Futuromania' is out now, published by White Rabbit

TAKE A BOW

Cellist Francesca Ter-Berg and violinist Flora Curzon met a decade ago while they were playing in other bands and soon discovered they had more in common than merely being string players. Their meeting of minds precipitated several exit strategies.

"We quickly realised that we had very niche interests in common," says Ter-Berg. "And that we wanted to actually make our own band pursuing these interests."

Out of this friendship came Fran & Flora, whose collective passions – including a love of klezmer music – have manifested themselves on two remarkable albums that transcend the recondite. Following on from 2019's 'Unfurl' is 'Precious Collection', just released on Hidden Notes.

Their unique collaboration takes in field trips to exotic and interesting places, such as an early rendezvous with the Belgian Sinti musician Tcha Limberger in Transylvania.

"With traditional music, you do have to find these people hiding away in a pub somewhere who've got the knowledge," says Ter-Berg. "But I met Tcha on a course, and then I wanted Flora to come because I didn't want to go on my own.

"Tcha speaks fluent English – he's kind of a linguist, one of those geniuses who's just good at everything. I will say that if they don't speak English and you don't speak their language, then that throws a whole spanner in the works and you will need a translator!"

Acquiring the klezmer knowledge tends to involve playing for eight hours a day – meals, drinks, bed, repeat. More recently, their intrepid adventures took them to New Hampshire for a writing session at an Airbnb in the middle of bear-infested woods, ahead of recording 'Precious Collection' in a studio in Maine.

"Yeah, there was a gas stove inside that had a big sign on it saying, 'Danger of death – do not use this inside'," remembers Curzon. "And I've never been so bitten by mosquitoes. My whole body was a mosquito bite."

Most important in all of this detail is the music itself, which is a unique fusion of klezmer and Eastern European folk techniques passed down via oral tradition, mixed up with improvisation, Yiddish songs and canny electronics. 'Romanian Fantasies II', for instance, is a collage of cut-up sounds which to the ear is nevertheless lucid. There are drones too, although the pair groan slightly when I mention them.

"It's more like a minimum of drones on this album because the first one was really quite drone-heavy," says Curzon.

"We wanted to push ourselves because with string layers, bringing in a drone is a very easy default," says Ter-Berg, who as a professional session musician is asked to drone more than is reasonable, apparently. "'You want us to drone, it's very expensive' – that's what I say to people when they hire us for recording. They're like, 'Oh, can you do some long notes?'. And I'm like, 'Yeah, it's a per-minute rate for that'."

To accompany Ter-Berg's cello solo on the 'Flowers For Innocence' track, the pair employed an Eventide Harmonizer – the digital effects processor that Tony Visconti famously said "fucks with the fabric of time". For the record, Fran & Flora used an H3000 to Visconti's very early H910 model.

"I would say it *does* fuck with time," concurs Ter-Berg. "And it's also got this really nice granular, clean texture to it. It works so well with strings – it's amazing. But in a way, the choice to use these kinds of electronics subtly is a really nice challenge because it's so easy to overdo it."

Ter-Berg and Curzon have clearly put in the groundwork in order to play these traditional songs as authentically as possible, but do they run up against klezmer purists who baulk at the idea of adding electronics?

"We do," says Curzon. "But I would say in any tradition that there will be people who are really purist about things."

"I think we're quite uptight about the traditional stuff because we have actually studied it," interjects Ter-Berg. "You get a lot of classical musicians who'll say, 'I play a bit of klezmer', but what they're really doing is playing Brahms and just adding a little schmaltzy slide in there. There's a lineage, and in Yiddish the word for lineage is 'yikhes', which we called one of our tracks, because we are transmitting an oral history that we want to pay homage to, as well as bringing in our own approach."

What is klezmer music, exactly? Etymology-wise, klezmer comes from "klei" and "zemer", or "vessel

Inspired by Yiddish songs and klezmer, experimental/ contemporary folk duo Fran & Flora fuse virtuoso strings, drones and loops to hugely beguiling effect

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN
PICTURE: DOM THOMPSON

of song". It's an instrumental musical tradition that stems largely from the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, is often associated with weddings, and incorporates elements of Ottoman and baroque music as well as Slavic folk dances. It's worth noting that Michael Alpert, doyen of the klezmer revolution and world authority on Yiddish songs, has given the group his seal of approval.

Klezmer once referred to the musicians rather than the genre, although that changed with the klezmer revival of the mid-to-late 1970s. Formerly, it would have gone by the Yiddish term "Freilach", meaning "cheerful music", although that feels like a misnomer given the melancholy strands pervading 'Precious Collection'.

"This is really important, because obviously our album is quite miserable in places," says Curzon. "There's also a thread that runs through a lot of klezmer tunes where happy and sad meet, and a big tradition within weddings where there is also grief, sadness and elements of darkness."

Conversely, there's plenty of playfulness on 'Precious Collection' too, including an opening track called 'Nudity', of all things.

"That was supposed to be 'New Ditty'," laughs Ter-Berg. "I was driving, and I came up with this tune and then said 'new ditty' into my phone and it came out as 'nudity'. We thought it was funny. Obviously people will think all kinds of things but it was just a silly joke."

'Precious Collection' is out now on Hidden Notes

PICTURE THIS

WOLFGANG TILLMANS

Build From Here

FRAGILE

You might recognise the name Wolfgang Tillmans. Tillmans is a German photographer and the first non-British winner of the Turner Prize. TIME Magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people of 2023. He has shot portraits of artists who are hallmarks of electronic music culture, including Kraftwerk, Billie Ray Martin, Aphex Twin, Pet Shop Boys, Richie Hawtin, Throbbing Gristle, James Holden and countless others.

The faces that have passed in front of his camera lens expose their vulnerabilities. In exchange, he vividly, inquisitively and sensitively emphasises their essence, their place in the world and their importance within their culture. He is a collaborator with his subject's personality, rather than a voyeuristic observer with a camera, creating enigmatic portraits in a world of dry selfies and untruthful manipulations.

As if these myriad talents weren't enough, Tillmans is also a musician. He began making music as part of a synth duo called Fragile in 1986. For someone whose work has a natural place in the gallery, Tillmans is as comfortable in the DJ booth of Berlin's Berghain as he is in the rarified surroundings of New York's Museum of Modern Art. He has performed at London's Tate Modern with Fragile, at the same time as he was presenting a major retrospective of his visual work.

He has been remixed by Pet Shop Boys, Honey Dijon and Roman Flügel. His unwavering interest in electronic music is perhaps the reason why he has become so established as the impressionistic sculptor of images of electronic artists.

'Build From Here', Tillman's second solo album, is different to his first, 2021's 'Moon In Earthlight'. That album now feels like a bridge between the gallery and the concert hall. It was the aural counterpart to a video installation at MoMA, filled with improvisations, spoken passages, found sound and elaborate electronic compositions. 'Moon In Earthlight' is a musical portrait, an artwork constructed as vibrations in the air rather than as an image through a lens. The key difference is that 'Build From Here' is a full collection of songs, and his ear, happily, is every bit as sharp as his eye.

His ear is also very eclectic. This is a record that covers a lot of ground. At one extreme we have Tillmans the experimenter. 'ADA403' and 'Primal (Intro)' are exercises in vocal manipulation, but they are not merely experiments for experiments' sake. There's real purpose and depth here.

From the massed choir-like loops and gauzy fabric of 'ADA403' emerges the plaintive phrase "walk away", filled with emotional gravity, resignation and anguish. 'Primal (Intro)' is rendered into complete gibberish, but it acts as a link to one of the album's most surprising moments. More on that momentarily.

At another extreme, we have Tillmans the philosopher. The unanswered question posed in the opening track, 'Where Does The Tune Hide?', is a simple pairing of voice and fragile, wavering synths. It showcases Tillman's poetic approach to lyric-writing. The focus here is interrelationships, delivered with his distinctive and enveloping voice – flimsy, wonderfully imperfect, yet filled with heavy and haunting emotions. 'There's More That Connects Us' is moving, hopeful and optimistic. It is a powerful rumination on societal strain, intolerance and populism, framed with a sense of anguish and honesty. "There's more that connects us than divides us," he sings.

And then we arrive at Tillmans the dancer and clubgoer. 'We Are Not Going Back', the surprising standout track that follows 'Primal (Intro)', is a low-key, hi-NRG banger that seems to propose a hypothetical mashup between Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem.

Gently euphoric, optimistic and resolutely forward-looking with its notion that there is only one direction and no other choice, somehow 'We Are Not Going Back' remains muted. As it progresses, its subversive sentiments are revealed to be about ageing and mortality and the unstoppable passage of time, all arranged with a DJ's knowledge of dance music's persuasive highs and lows.

The curious highlight, though, is 'Cab Ride'. "Weiß du?" ("Do you know?") enquires Tillmans over a shimmering web of pretty, interwoven synths, a steady, metronomic pulse and snippets of overheard conversation. Its conceit and emotional power lies fully in its minimalism.

That repeated line, its phrasing gently altered each time it is sung, has a plaintive significance. So many possible answers, and so many possible facets to its inquiry. As with a number of instances here, it is frank, open and yet fully unexplained, just like so many of Tillmans' acclaimed photographs.

MAT SMITH

THE BACK

KHÔRA
Gestures Of Perception
MARIONETTE

Toronto's Khôra (Matthew Ramolo) is a master of the organic and digital planes. His rare skill runs through this thrumming double album, which is a monument to the blurring of boundaries. There are antecedents to this – Four Tet's 'Rounds', Rival Consoles and even Nils Frahm – but the way that natural and electronic elements combine makes this new territory. From the treated bells and birdsong of 'Flux And Hieroglyph' to the looped beats and ringing metallics of 'Ligature Of Mineral', Khôra's creations transcend mere drone-age evocations to achieve something of rare beauty. **AT**

NEU GESTALT
Dreaming Serpents
ALEX TRONIC

Neu Gestalt is Les Scott, an Edinburgh producer specialising in ambient electronica. His fifth album 'Dreaming Serpents' sees shimmering soundscapes mixed with gritty, downtempo beats, snatches of vocal samples and richly evocative production. As a whole, this creates the unsettling feeling that you've landed on a post-apocalyptic version of planet Earth. The title track is all clicks, hisses and mournful melodies, while 'On The Edge Of Your World' features synths that twinkle morosely, as though they're the last stars disappearing from the sky. Edgy, gloomy and also wonderfully clever. **IB**

SEABUCKTHORN
This Warm, This Late
QUIET DETAILS

Seabuckthorn is Andy Cartwright, an English multi-instrumentalist who has something of a magic touch with his intricate method of guitar playing. Together with double bassist and trombonist Phil Cassel, and incorporating field recordings and distortion, Cartwright paints incredible sonic vistas here, like the droning, clattering 'Rising With The Sun'. To call these compositions cinematic doesn't do them nearly enough justice – on 'The Lights All Out', the sweeping, melancholy atmosphere is so encompassing that it feels like you've dropped into another dimension entirely. **CF**

JECK GLASS DUBS
Respooled
THE TAPEWORM

'Respooled' finds Athens sound artist Dimitris Papadatos (Jay Glass Dubs) re-composing the late Philip Jeck's tape, 'Spool'. 'Spool' launched The Tapeworm cassette imprint in 2009, and the trigger for Papadatos' new piece was an event hosted by the label this year. This two-part suite, with tracks simply titled 'Part I' and 'Part II', is a restless, evolving soundscape. It's filled with grubby electro-symphonic textures, murky voices, brief snatches of melody, dubby bass and echoing pulses that atomise then collapse. A fitting, ferric tribute to both Jeck and the wriggly inventiveness of The Tapeworm. **MS**

AILI - PHOTO: TINA LEWIS HERBOTS

AILI

Nandakke?

ESKIMO

The debut album from this Japanese-Belgian duo wears its offbeat charm lightly. It's full of playful little details, like the barking dog on 'Ichibansen' and the aerobics chants on 'Up & Down'. The lyrics, sung almost wholly in Japanese, speak of the immigrant experience of vocalist Aili Maruyama, who left Tokyo aged seven and apparently spoke in a "made-up", improvised version of the language with her father for years. The music, meanwhile, is warm and welcoming electropop played on vintage synths, exuding a quirky sense of fun. **WS**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

MCPM012 Session Tapes

MOOLAKII CLUB AUDIO INTERFACE

The second compendium from the consistently impressive Moolakii Club Audio Interface label – self-billed as the place for "peripheral and underground experimental electronica" – is an absolute gift box of introspective delights. Showcasing new and emerging artists, the many tones and textures deliver an irresistible netherworld of misted wonder – seductively immersive on the slow-build sunrise of 'Morning Hope' (Autumna), brief but deeply resonant on the Buchla-sculpted 'Sacred Spirit' (Ogle) and hypnotically lysergic on 'Swimming In The Madness' (Zeze Wakamatsu). Highly recommended. **CG**

BOYCALLEDCROW

Kullu

MORTALITY TABLES

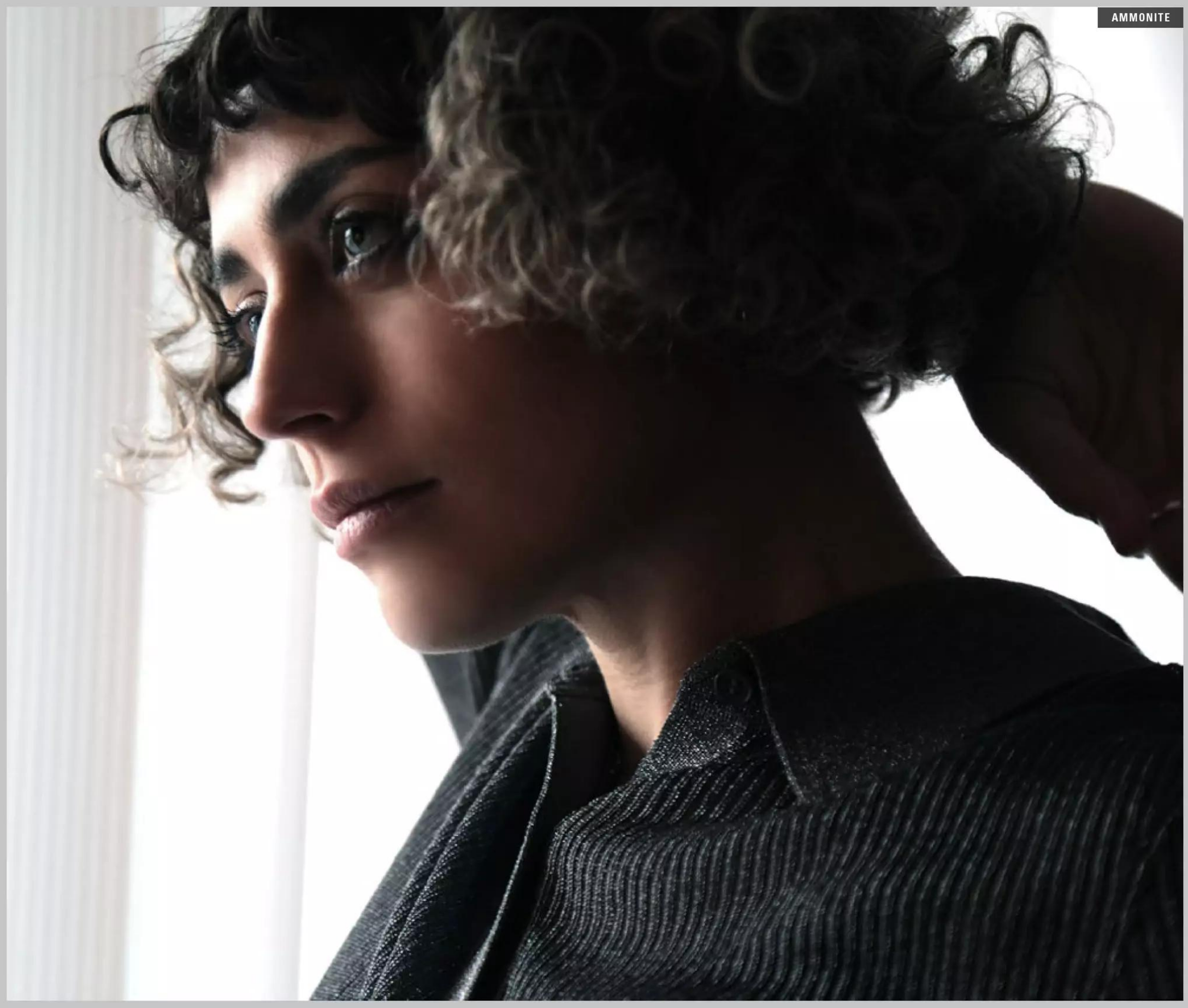
This stunning audio travelogue captures sound artist Carl M Knott's post-university travels in India, which he undertook as a way of overcoming the stress and anxiety that had been a feature of his adolescence. The result is a collage of sounds that are both recognisable and obtuse, providing a strange sense of calm from within the storm. This is especially evident on tracks like 'Charas', 'Joy' and 'Golden City', which emerge through the immersive, disquieting life rhythms that evolve around the listener. **MJ**

PLANT VOX

REset

PLATOON

And, on keyboards – an evergreen Ashwagandha. Not content with a bit of basic pruning at weekends, Oram Award winner Helen Anahita Wilson combines close-mic recordings of plants in Sussex gardens with compositions derived from their genetic codes, creating a delightfully seamless suite. Indian classical motifs cross-pollinate with swelling electronica, as the reposeful harp of 'Vivo' is subsumed by the slow-breath ambience of 'Deep Rest' and 'Essence'. Originally seeded to aid mindfulness in cancer patients, it has flowered into a soothing panacea for all. **BF**



AMMONITE
Blueprints
RANSOM NOTE

Hitherto best-known for her ethereal guest vocals for Bicep, the debut solo album from London artist Amy Spencer proves her voice can be more than window-dressing for other people's tunes. Indeed, it can make a whole tune on its own. Spencer's approach is to sing and process the results through an array of effects, so on 'When You Don't', intimate lyrics rise amid a devotional choral backdrop, while 'ARP' sounds almost completely synthetic as Spencer uses software to put a high-tech gloss on glossolalia. **PC**

SYNTHETIC VILLAINS
Sounds From Inside The Racing Mind
BANDCAMP

What does "contabulation" mean? Nothing whatsoever, as it turns out, but Lancaster insomniac Richard Turner lay awake one night convinced it referred to the sound of metal being struck. The result? The tinkling melodies of 'Cascading Confabulations' – a word that *does* exist, and refers appropriately to false memories. This hugely enjoyable album boasts fuzzy dream logic throughout, with the likes of 'Nipparty Noppit' and 'Mind Pops' combining dinky beats and vintage bleeps to effortlessly recreate the whirling mental gymnastics of the reluctantly wide-awake. **BF**

MODERNA
The Future Is Among Us
BRAVE NEW RAVE

Given that it was created over a seven-year period between Mexico City and Berlin, we shouldn't be too surprised that Moderna's debut album is awash with various influences. The Berlin producer opens proceedings with a tribute to Prince ('DIE4U'), skips through machine-like synthpop with a Germanic techno backbone ('Filter Me'), before 'Pappenhaimer' employs a Goldfrapp-style glam rock stomp. How to describe it all? Unmissable is certainly one word that does the job. **BW**

SOFT COTTON COUNTY
Ten Years Of Travel
5000

Slow and steady wins the race for this dreamy indie folk group from London, who released their debut LP back in 2009. Fifteen years later, it's finally time for the follow-up, which blends delicate vocals vaguely reminiscent of The Sundays' Harriet Wheeler with blues-tinged guitars and hazy, delicate synth pads. When they hit on a memorable melody – as on the meditative opening track 'It Could Happen To You' and the wistful 'Blue On Blue' – the songs become positively hypnotic. **IB**

WOLFGANG SEIDEL
Friendly Electrons
KARLRECORDS

Wolfgang Seidel's place in history is guaranteed. He drummed with krautrock legend Conrad Schnitzler for over 40 years and was part of the Zodiak Free Arts Lab scene that birthed key krautrock icons Tangerine Dream and Kluster. These largely improvised pieces are inspired by Schnitzler's collages and Seidel's extemporaneous zeal (he was also the drummer in 1960s German anarchist group Ton Steine Scherben). From echoey telephonic soundscapes ('Art Space') to humming modular synths ('Organic Music No 1') the results are by turns fascinating and unsettling. Restlessly inventive. **AT**

KOPY
Heart Fresh
TAL

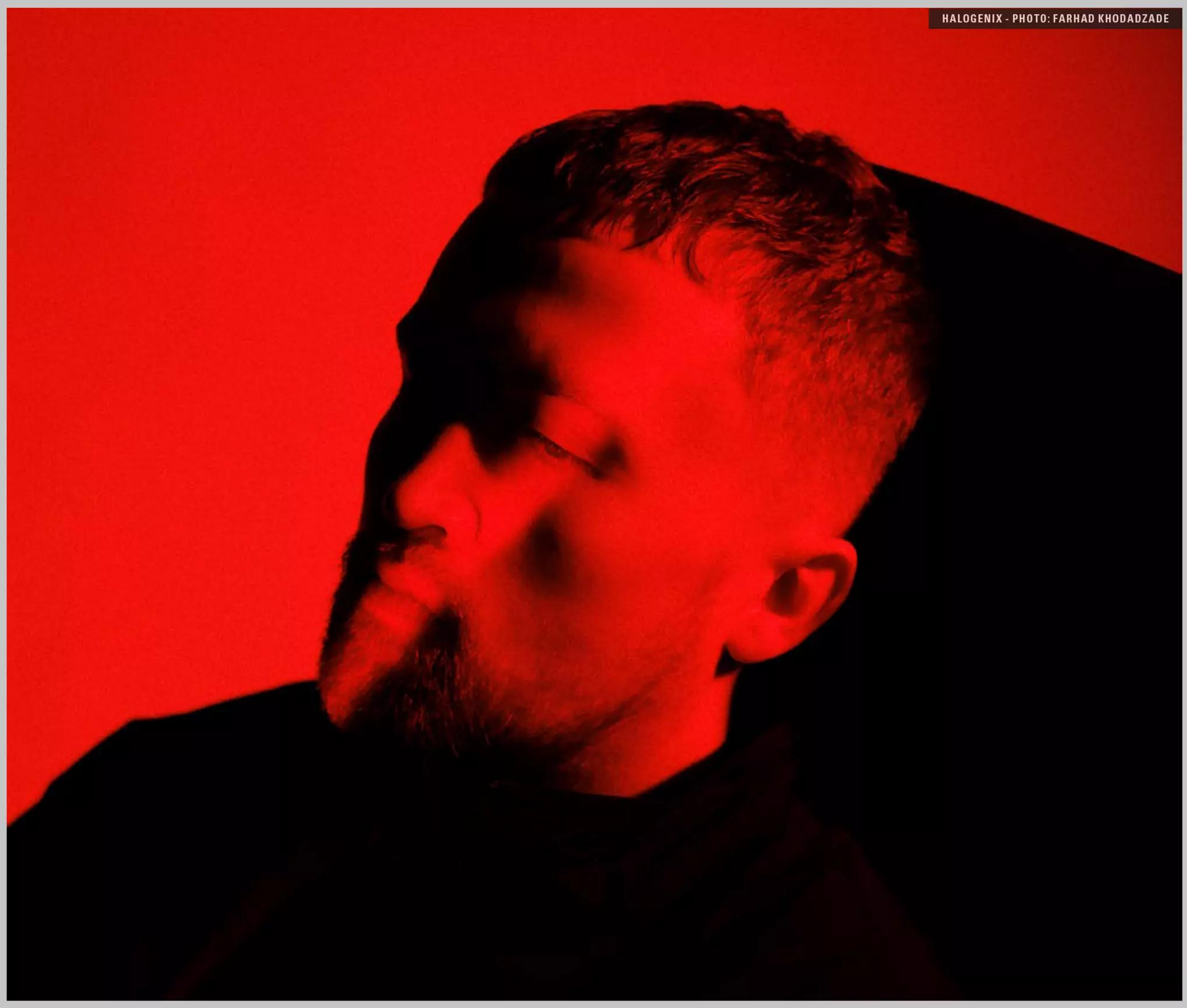
Osaka's Yuko Kureyama is Kopy, and hers is a blistering brand of hard, club-centric yet experimental electronics. She manages to pull off that rare trick of exciting both your hedonistic, base inner beast *and* your active, enquiring higher functions. The carnal abandon of 'New Walk' weaves an array of magical, layered, warped sci-fi pyrotechnics into uncompromising futurism. Elsewhere, the rapid-fire, pattern-shifting percussive bravura of 'Hole Hole' might send you fully doolally. Impressive. **CG**

RACINE
Boue
GIN&PLATONIC

Montreal's Racine may be a familiar name thanks to the two harrowing albums he released through Danse Noir, each of which challenged notions of ambient. Nonetheless, he has always demonstrated an exact ear for creaky, thin, piercing music, perfectly suited for moody at-home listening. 'Boue' sees him take that well-honed edge, and make terrifying club weaponry from it. 'Boue II' pitches blurred flurries of treacle-thick kicks under a snowstorm of howling strings, while 'Boue VI' converts the techno parallelisms of the record into a strung-out, eight-minute dirge. Killer, attitude-heavy music. **FH**

ONEPOINTWO
Voyages Extraordinaires
HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

From the stirring, cosmic opening salvo of manipulated tape loops on 'Fauna Exile', the adventurous spirit of Onepointwo's latest album rings out loud and clear. Taking inspiration from French author Jules Verne's questing novels, the Greek producer charts the highs and lows of an imagined odyssey to the unknown. Through the spooky, reverb-laden depths of 'L'Île Mystérieuse' and the cyclical churn of 'La Jangada' to the close, uneasy drone of 'Terre', it's an electronic escapade that's all about the journey, not the destination. **CF**



HALOGENIX - PHOTO: FARHAD KHODADZADE

HALOGENIX

Passions

GEMINI GEMINI

London's Laurence Reading fuses brooding drum 'n' bass with emotion-inflected vocals on his debut album, looking to the future with echoes of the past. 'Reverie' and 'Untitled Emo' are packed with irresistible, razor-sharp compressed beats, bringing to mind the vintage euphoria typified by the 'V Classic' compilation from 1997. Elsewhere, 'Peng' and the interludes of 'Souldout' offer what feels like a woozy, out-of-focus inner space trip. All told, 'Passions' feels destined to become an exemplar of a soulful new style of drum 'n' bass. **AT**

M WAGNER

We Could Stay

EXTREMELY PURE

'We Could Stay', the debut album from Brooklyn electronic musician M Wagner, is as much a diary of found sounds as it is an album. Wagner logs his psychogeographic experiences, from the emotional upheaval of a relocation to New York from Chicago (the title track) to the generator he recorded outside his hotel room while on holiday ('Rome Generator'). A classical music fan, he also deposits samples from Mahler and Stravinsky into tracks like 'Release Yrself', transforming everything into tactile, atmospheric electronica that's redolent of artists like Vladislav Delay or Wolfgang Voigt. **JA**

BRIAN D'SOUZA / OR:LA

Mycorrhizal Fungi

A STATE OF FLO

Sound artist Brian D'Souza (aka Auntie Flo) has teamed up with techno producer Or:la and harpist Róisín Berkeley to make 'Mycorrhizal Fungi', the first release on D'Souza's new label A State Of Flo. Comprising two pieces originally commissioned for Glastonbury 2023, the album aims to explore the humble world of the mushroom, and does so with unprecedented elegance. The title track is the highlight, employing electrical impulses from various fungi to create a glistening, glinting soundscape, the ever-evolving nature of which is oddly poignant. **IB**

BETH GIBBONS

Lives Outgrown

DOMINO

Arriving a good 30 years into her career, the first solo album proper from Portishead frontwoman Beth Gibbons is worth the wait. Securing the services of producer James Ford, 'Lives Outgrown' is a pitch-perfect collection that puts Gibbons' extraordinary voice front and centre, suspended over muted folk strings, subtle analogue synth ambience and uncanny tension throughout. 'Lost Changes' builds orchestrally and even features a brief whistling solo, while 'Burden Of Life' and 'Rewind' are built on rhythmic percussion and hand drums. Here's hoping the next one doesn't take three decades. **JA**

CONTOURS
Elevations
MUSIC FROM MEMORY

Anyone who has ever trundled through Cumbria by rail will agree that the area's landscapes boast a particular kind of beauty. Contours (Manchester's Tom Burford) pays homage to the undulating scenery with this radiant collection of fourth world-adjacent ambient electronica. 'Bike Shed' makes for a trance-inducing opening track, 'Balafon C' conjures up a glittering rhythm from its namesake Malian tuned instrument, and the standout 'Pots' is a heady, ecstatic brew of jazz brass, synthesiser and percussion. Truly sublime. **CF**

IGLOOGHOST
Tidal Memory Exo
LUCKYME®

Recorded in a squat on the Kent coast, the latest album from Irish producer Seamus Malliagh evokes the atmosphere of the English seaside. Which is to say that it's dark, turbulent and quite possibly toxic. Luckily, it isn't full of shit though. On tracks like 'Nemat0de' Malliagh's weather-beaten vocals crash against barnacle-encrusted versions of the hyper-speed rhythms of his earlier albums like 'Neō Wax Bloom' to spectacular effect. 'Spawn01', meanwhile, resembles trip hop dredged from the depths, with vocalist Cyst sounding like a siren swaddled in rotting kelp. **PC**

PENNY ARCADE
Backwater Collage
TAPETE

From "a place of secret coves and vast moors" (we think it might be Totnes) comes James Hoare, one-time guitarist with Veronica Falls. His first solo album pays clear homage to his beloved Velvet Underground, all packing-case drums and mooning arpeggios, but there's British psychedelic whimsy at large here too. 'Dear John' could be a folky 'White Album' outtake, 'Black Cloud' sounds like Syd Barrett becoming a little too lucid for comfort. "Every day the same merry-go-round / Trapped inside a paper bag." A keening, pensive sigh of an album. **BF**

RODION GA
From The Archives 1981-2017
ACE

Rodion Roșca founded Rodion GA in the late 1970s under the watchful eye of the tyrannical communist regime of his native Romania. As a consequence, very little of their groundbreaking music was released – until now, that is. This compilation brings together 21 stellar tracks from Roșca's personal archive. The high points are innumerable, with madcap electronic delights like 'Punct' and 'Vine Larna' wearing their ingenuity on their sleeve, and some of the more conventional moments like 'Talk To Me' rarely lacking a rousing melody. A fitting tribute to Roșca, who sadly passed away in 2021. **IB**

MARUCOPOROPORO

Conceive The Sea

FLAU

Many albums take the sea as inspiration, but precious few namecheck amniotic fluid. The latter's comforting warmth certainly seems closer to the music on offer here, as Japanese composer and singer Marucoporoporo treats us to the eerie "gossamer" 21st century folk on her debut long-player. With acoustic guitar embellishments and hazy, enveloping ambient arrangements, the likes of 'Cycle Of Love' and 'As I Am' sound like they could have been made by Björk's introverted twin sister. **BW**

VIVABEAT

Party In The War Zone / The House Is Burning

RUBELLAN REMASTERS

Peter Gabriel proteges Vivabeat originally released their synth-driven debut album 'Party In The War Zone' in 1980 and went on to tour with the likes of Depeche Mode and The Human League before fizzling out later that decade. This much-deserved re-release features some long-lost classics of the new wave underground, including the jagged 'Wild World' and the driving, Devo-esque 'Jet Set'. Also reissued is 'The House Is Burning', a greatest hits package that confirms Vivabeat could – and should – have made it to the top. **IB**

LOLA DE LA MATA

Oceans On Azimuth

BANDCAMP

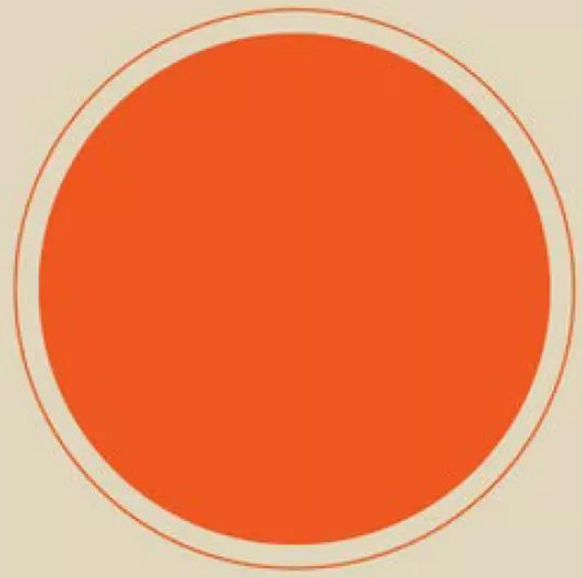
Suffering from tinnitus back in 2019, French-Spanish composer Lola De La Mata could have easily given up on music. Instead she made 'Oceans On Azimuth', an "auditory odyssey" into the condition. 'Left Ear' is a gradual whoosh of subtle electronics, while the elusive trills and ambiguous clang of 'KOH – Klee – Uh' recall Isnaj Dui's 2019 album 'Sight Seeing', a musical illlustration of visual problems. Here, De La Mata represents different ways of hearing, by reclaiming the sounds caused by tinnitus and repurposing them into delicate, beautiful new forms. **ST**

CARLOS GIFFONI

Dream Walker

IDEOLOGIC ORGAN

Carlos Giffoni established himself on the New York avant-garde scene as a guitar/laptop "noisician" and festival curator some two decades back. Now, the Venezuelan artist resides in LA, where he opts to use a cavalcade of synths on his first album in six years. There's a hint of chaos and sonic friction, but it's played off against sweeping orchestral grandeur ('Episode'), choral-like ambience ('One Breath') and arresting melodic simplicity ('Ticking Clock' and 'Sunrise'). Graceful musicality that's nicely frazzled and a little bit warped around the edges. **BW**



DAWN CHORUS AND THE INFALLIBLE SEA

Reveries

SONIC CATHEDRAL

"Dronegaze" is how this US trio categorise their work. And it's a fitting sobriquet for these six, slowly shifting ambient pieces, many adorned by guitar effects and bucketloads of reverb. Strings glide softly across the beautiful 'Somnium', while 'Vale' features rising synth swells against a stark backdrop. There is something devotional, sacred even, going on here, placing 'Reveries' one step removed from new age music. The title is apt, too – this is an album to close your eyes and gently drift away to. **WS**

LYLI J

Majjie

SEE BLUE AUDIO

Lyli J is French-American musician Lily Jordy, and the title of her fourth album is her approximation of the French word for "magic". Like the mountainous terrain adorning the record sleeve – a sky so crisp as to be almost purple, hanging over the slightly-too-green greens of the tree line – tracks such as 'Tide' and 'Chaconne' capture a place whose colours are so vivid they seem unreal. The highlight is 'See', a piece that combines sweeping strings with wobbling analogue synth to transcend the verdant landscapes it evokes. **ST**

SHAKALI

Rihmastossa

NOT NOT FUN

Finnish-born Shakali made an impact outside of his adoptive home of Brno, Czechia, with his previous album 'Aurinkopari' on Good Morning Tapes. Following the spiritual ambient ley lines of his previous work, 'Rihmastossa' blends the strings of the Finnish kantele into an environment of hushed wind instruments and tuned metals on 'Ensisäie', and with running water and light, bubbling synthesis on 'Juoluat'. If Alice Coltrane or Pharoah Sanders made some of your favourite jazz, Shakali is here, just waiting to be discovered. **FH**

BELA

Noise And Cries 굉음과 울음

SUBTEXT / UNSOUND

South Korean artist Bela first caught our attention with their 2021 EP 'Guidelines', which featured drum patterns delivered in devastating formation. 'Noise And Cries 굉음과 울음', jointly released by Subtext and Unsound Festival, sees the artist combine that formula with bloody, howling screams divided at a molecular level then rejoined and grated over gridless drums. 'The Sage' takes black metal in one hand and underlit, almost-dubstep in the other, and from this builds a ferocious hybrid. Unmissable, but not served without warning. **FH**

KEE AVIL - PHOTO: FATINE-VIOLETTE SABIRI

KEE AVIL
Spine
CONSTELLATION

Montreal producer Kee Avil's follow-up to 2022's disconcerting 'Crease' is more direct than its precursor, though only just. 'Felt', with its deliberately untuned, off-kilter guitar lines, is underpinned with a pulse and carries vocals where you can barely discern a tune. 'The Iris Dry' has alien pop moments too, though it all feels morbidly, claustrophobically close. Avil is developing her own musical language on 'Spine', where guitar harmonics converge with creeping electronics and airless vocals to create sui generis pieces that are best experienced within the insular world of headphones. **JA**

CAMP
Commun·e
NO TYPE

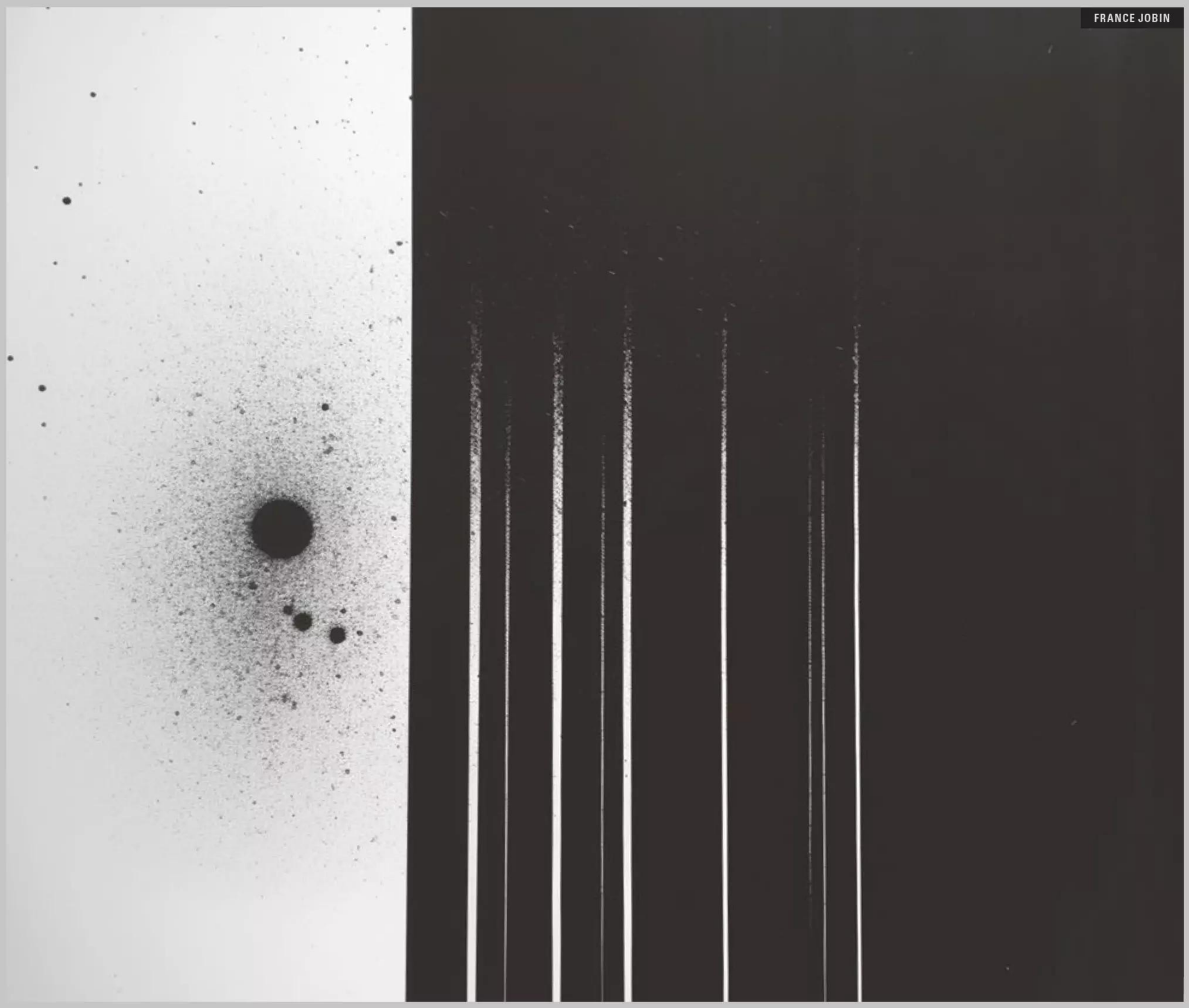
No Type founder David Turgeon takes the reins of his own label for the first release under his Camp moniker in 17 years. Flirting with different styles and forms, this is a unique take on dub techno informed by footwork's pace and sparse palette. Pieces like 'Quartz' trace a mineral vein of rhythm, and 'Nocturne' melds rough digital texture with rosy sunset ambience. Footwork is an integral part of dance music's evolution, but Camp finds plenty of room to sketch out a more conceptual vision of the genre. **FH**

PHASE4OUR
Language Barrier
MACHINE

Phase4our is one of the guises used by Access Tonal Communications, an incognito collective of electronic music makers from Wales. They lower the veil of anonymity on 'Language Barrier' just enough to give us a peek into a weird and wonderful world of bleepy, glitchy experimental electro. Tracks such as 'Hpirep (Meson Peripheral Mix)' and 'The Dictatorship Of Vested Interests' are a befuddling but strangely likeable combination of warped rhythms and scrambled video game sonics. In respect of making the dancefloor move, there's no communication gap here. **CF**

MIEKO SHIMIZU
My Tentacles
STREET FURNITURE

Originally released under the name Mico, this 2011 album from Japanese artist Mieko Shimizu gets a well-deserved reissue under her given name. It's constantly inventive, but crucially not afraid of melody. The best moments are the more heartfelt tracks like 'Cruising Forever', which juxtaposes a gentle electric piano, buzzing synth figure and multitracked voice. On 'I See A Soul' Shimizu mixes a Björk-style vocal with stabbing synth beats and strings. Indeed, if you pine for the days of the Icelandic producer's prolific output, you could do worse than check this out. **WS**



FRANCE JOBIN
Infinite Probabilities (Particle 2)
ROOM40

More deep-thinking sound design from Montreal's France Jobin, who focuses her attention on theories of quantum mechanics here. For the two 20-minute sound sculptures comprising her latest album, she employed elaborate processing, a deftly understated approach to electronic composition and field recordings from Europe, Australia, South America and Japan. 'Unified Quantum State' is enfolding, fringed with clicking sounds, undulating drones and shifting patterns of white noise, while 'Superposition' is, by comparison, light and airy. 'Infinite Probabilities' is an album enriched with scientific inquisitiveness and impassioned curiosity. **MS**

SHARDS
Byrd Song
ERASED TAPES

Shards is the contemporary voice ensemble lead by neoclassical choralist and composer Kieran Brunt. Here, they take inspiration from the Renaissance composer William Byrd, whose powerfully emotive work Brunt reinterpreted last year for BBC Radio 3, using processed electronics, Auto-Tune and found sounds. Exquisitely intricate, masterfully poised and spectral tracks like 'Facta Est Deserta' or the mesmerising 'Amen, Amen, Amen…' take us somewhere else entirely, and are rendered with a startling devotional freshness. **CG**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
SIIIX Vol 1
MALOCA

Belgian label Maloca continues its sterling run of releases with another excellent instalment, this time a collection of tracks curated by the Dutch percussive ensemble HIIIT. First up is Italian drumming ace Valentina Magaletti, with the swirling, heady 'A Drink With The Queen Of Wands'. She's followed by Maloca associate Hihats In Trees, who drops the squiggly, punchy workout 'CAIRO'. With further contributions from the likes of Azu Tiwaline and Upsammy, this is a compilation that presents the cutting-edge in percussive, experimental electronics. **CF**

WALT DISCO
The Warping
LUCKY NUMBER

The second album from Glasgow art-glam adventurers Walt Disco finds them fusing the flavours of a Christopher Isherwood Berlin novel, 1970s art rock histrionics and a trash disco aesthetic, all covered in richly dramatic orchestration. The resulting grandiose, sophisti-pop perfection draws on Sparks, borrows from Scott Walker, builds on David Bowie and twists Roxy Music (see 'Pearl') to create mini operas that swing between kitsch and chic, cynicism and optimism. Bold, beautiful and knowingly out of step with the times. **MJ**

AUDIO OBSCURA
Acid Field Recordings In Dub
SUBEXOTIC

The latest album from Norfolk sound artist Neil Stringfellow is the product of an epiphanic appreciation of how the natural sounds he heard in 2022 all seemed to present a dubby resonance. As a sensitive manipulator of field recordings, Stringfellow has always been able to isolate overlooked characteristics in sounds, responding sympathetically with his electronic compositions. Here we find him presenting pretty birdsong that arpeggiates like a sinewy analogue synth, and a chattering crow that approximates a reggae DJ toasting over a heavyweight dub track.

'Babyloniacid' and 'Through Nuclear Skies' are the album's most impactful moments, the combination of synth-like birdsong and his own acid-inflected lines casually interfacing over especially bass-heavy rhythms. Elsewhere, 'Song For The Lost Cartographer' has a delicate levity, with an opening recording of wind rustling in high trees ushering in an inquisitive synth melody that echoes the breeze's unpredictability. A fascinating twist on Stringfellow's field recording aesthetic and dub's venerable framework. **MS**

HHY & THE MACUMBAS
Bom Sangue Mau
HORROR VECTOR

Combining relentless traditional rhythms with dub and psychedelia, HHY & The Macumbas create a unique blend of boundary-blasting influences, all brewed up in their home town of Porto, Portugal. For their fourth album, 'Bom Sangue Mau' ('Good Bad Blood'), they decamped to a deserted theatre with a sound system, a lighting rig and a smoke machine – but no audience – to generate the mood that inspires the urgent force of the band.

Polymath Jonathan Uliel Saldanha oversees the controls, creating a wall of sound, flooding cascading organic percussion in waves of unsettling widescreen electronica and fractured dub. The result is exhilarating, unabating music, where dialling down the intensity is never an option. From the distorted vocals of 'Serpente Explícita' to the acid rat-a-tat drums and psych-brass of 'Febre Febre' and 'Porno Perptuum', this is a mesmerising, end-of-the-world partying experience. The highlight is 'Fundição Termal Caçada', which builds to a blistering climax of discordant synths and swirling rhythms. Dance music is seldom simultaneously so irresistible and unnerving. **AT**

CONRAD SCHNITZLER
Slow Motion
BUREAU B

Conrad Schnitzler's time with Tangerine Dream and Kluster is well documented, but less well-known is his artistic relationship with fellow German experimenter Karl Horst Hödicke. Painting, sculpture, performance, as well as film and music, marked their efforts to redefine the avant-garde. This is Schnitzler's score for Hödicke's 1976 film 'Slow Motion' which, despite being constructed entirely from searing analogue synths and delicately employed electronic rhythms, is as action-packed as the visuals are minimal.

There are vague traces of the krautrock giants of the early 70s, but they are distant. The chattering pulse of 'Slow Motion 9', for example, has echoes of Tangerine Dream, and the gentle shuffle and plaintive synth of 'Slow Motion 10' reflects early Kraftwerk. Given its radical origins, however, it's reassuring that most parallels come from music that followed – 23 Skidoo, Mixmaster Morris, Aphex Twin and Boards Of Canada head up a lengthy list. Obviously, it's trailblazing stuff, but it's also surprisingly nourishing and entertaining, even now. **BW**

BODEGA - PHOTO: POONEH GHANA

BODEGA
Our Brand Could Be Yr Life
CHRYSALIS

From the opening hookline-drenched snarl of 'Dedicated To The Dedicated', to the closing post-punk stroll of 'City Is Taken', 'Our Brand Could Be Yr Life' traverses the spaces between Strummer-esque melodic freneticism, the electro-humping humour of LCD Soundsystem and the mischief of The B-52's.

Lyrically, New York's Bodega explore the themes of neoliberal consumer culture and capitalist realism through the lens of sardonic display. Ironic, then, that this latest album is a reworking of the highlights from their debut lo-fi, no-frills collection. Before you can say Phil Collins and Taylor Swift, they reclaim the means of production, redefine the frames of consumption and reinforce social media's remake/remodel capitalist trap. It could have been a disaster, of course, but the new versions of songs like 'Set The Controls To The Heart Of The Drum' and 'Cultural Consumer I', 'II' and 'III' contain a richer-hued clarity and more impactful punch that melts with screen desire while raging at techno feudalism. **MJ**

MULTIPLES
Two Hours Or Something
STOOR

Tresor techno titan Surgeon gets filthy with Speedy J as Multiples, on a work of grubby jams recorded in Speedy's hometown of Rotterdam. The album was laid down in just a couple of days without much forethought or editing, so it wears elements of the city close to its surface. Reverberating iron-clad drones, beefy concrete bleeps, tweets and gasps as frustrated as traffic jams.

On the memorable title track, you can feel the existential coffee slurps of studio sessions stretching into the early hours as candescent chimes glide over motes of electronic dust. The loops of dazzling ambience on 'Spirit' feel like Aphex Twin's 'On' viewed through an age-filter app. And on the defiant sulk of 'System Down', bulbous alarms signal a furious techno trudge that evokes drunken fights on Preston high street. So maybe Multiples could be Rotterdam or anywhere, but this abrasive approach to free-form techno is Surgeon and Speedy J's alone. **FR**

VICIOUS PINK
Unexpected
MINIMAL WAVE

Having met in a Leeds nightclub in 1979, singer Josephine Warden and keyboard player Brian Moss actually started out doing backing vocals for Soft Cell – on 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret', no less – before scoring a couple of minor UK hits as 80s electropop duo Vicious Pink, most notably 1984's deliciously sultry 'Cccan't You See…'.

Reflecting VP's artful/electronic/new wave 80s sound, this new compilation showcases previously unreleased tracks (some of them written with a certain Dave Ball), all loaded with requisite edge and attitude. 'Alien Patience' rocks with buzzsaw synths and punkish insouciance, instrumentals 'Chaos 303' and 'Undercover' benefit from a generous slathering of rubber-funk 303 bass and essential squelch – predating peak acid house by a few years. The standout, 'Slightly Ahead', channels Cabaret Voltaire's stuttery, left-field machine funk to magnificent effect. Still sounding super-fresh, 'Unexpected' leaves you wondering what success this criminally overlooked outfit might have had if the stars had aligned a little differently. **VI**

FAT WHITE FAMILY - PHOTO: LOUISE MASON

FAT WHITE FAMILY

Forgiveness Is Yours

DOMINO

In an era dominated by BRIT School alumni, posh kids and careerists, they're the last surviving link to the ideal of the rock band as a haven, a vessel for chemically deranged outsiders, the lineage of Shaun Ryder, Shane MacGowan and Mark E Smith. So where do we find the Fat Whites in 2024? Well, teetering on the edge. As ever. But for the first time, much of their fourth album sounds genuinely disturbed. Bad trip disturbed.

'Polygamy Is Only For The Chief' forces a rinky-dink synth pattern to rub against a Bowie-ish guitar, while 'Today You Become Man' is a machine-gunned spoken word recitation of frontman Lias Saoudi's brother's circumcision. 'Religion For One' is a mournful waltz complete with a choir and honking tuba. If there's humour here, it's of the darkest variety. For all the nightmarish-sounding musical juxtapositions, though, it's still undeniably them. At times, it's weirdly catchy – try getting the keening chorus of 'Feed The Horse' out of your head once you've heard it. Whatever the future holds for the band, 'Forgiveness Is Yours' confirms Saoudi as a maverick talent who's now producing work that stands in league with his idols. **WS**

WARRINGTON-RUNCORN NEW TOWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Your Community Hub

CASTLES IN SPACE

It's only three years since Gordon Chapman-Fox recorded his first Warrington-Runcorn album as a nose-thumbing "what the hell" riposte to an indifferent world. Four albums later, he has been crowned King of the New Towns, a crusading champion of brutalist town planning, the only man to have led euphoric festival crowds into fist-pumping celebrations of Rocksavage Power Station at the side of the M56.

The message has become more political, but 'Your Community Hub' is not a polemic album. Inspired by Runcorn's Castlefields Centre, it's a heartwarming celebration of forgotten togetherness. 'A Shared Sense Of Purpose' sets the scene, a glimmering modular tribute to streets bustling with snotty kids and headscarf-clad pensioners alike. 'Rapid Transport Links' adds kinetic beats, 'Facilities For All Ages' is a lightly hypnotic homage to a receding age of accessible healthcare. If 2023's 'The Nation's Most Central Location' was a scream of anger at the misery of modern life, this is more a resigned head shake at the fading memories of what we've lost – but is no less affecting for it. **BF**

ARAB STRAP

I'm Totally Fine With It Don't Give A Fuck Anymore

ROCK ACTION

The eighth Arab Strap LP finds the Glaswegian duo focusing once more on unhealthy relationships and nights of self-loathing. The difference this time being that the "X" that Aidan Moffat sings about isn't a former girlfriend but the platform that was formerly called Twitter, and the urges not booze and sex but doomscrolling and chasing "likes". The opening salvo of tracks all lacerate the ills of social media with Moffat's customary serrated wit – whether it's "Crippling fucking FOMO" on 'Sociometer Blues' or rampant misogyny on 'Bliss'.

Meanwhile, other half Malcolm Middleton has been playing with some new toys while Moffat has been glued to his phone. This is the most electronic Arab Strap album yet, with sequencers and 303 acid lines wriggling throughout 'Strawberry Moon' and 'Molehills'. Fans of the band's earlier lo-fi indie incarnation will be appeased by the likes of 'Summer Season', and although 25 years ago the pair had the world-weary bitterness of old heads on young shoulders, now they rage with the energy of a group half their age. **PC**

BROADCAST
Spell Blanket – Collected Demos 2006-2009
WARP

Part one of Broadcast's swansong

We've waited over a decade for these songs, following Trish Keenan's death from pneumonia in 2011. Six months after her passing, the sole remaining Broadcast member, bassist James Cargill, said that once he had finished the soundtrack to Peter Strickland's 'Berberian Sound Studio' he would return to Keenan's vast collection of demos and MiniDiscs and complete the last Broadcast album.

That record never appeared and now, never will. What we have instead is a dazzling, kaleidoscopic representation of all of Broadcast's contradictory, esoteric voices. From early obsessions with library music and 1960s electronica ('The Games You Play'), through eerie folk ('Petal Alphabet') to icy experimental soundtrack expressions ('Tell Table'). The arrangements are complex and multilayered, and Keenan's softly intoning voice is frequently accompanied by an unearthly choir of Keenans. It's a world away from the traditional idea of a demo.

Tracks like 'March Of The Fleas' (all relentless mechanical guitar strum and blasts of noise offstage), 'Roses Red' (military drums and guitars spiralling upwards to eternity) and 'Follow The Light' (undulating keyboards and synth flute topped by Keenan's soft beseeching) are instant classics that evoke the early days of Broadcast.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, 'Running Back To Me' boasts a grinding, looping bassline and ritualistic chant-like vocals that could grace any 1970s demon possession movie (or, of course, a "Berberian sound studio").

However, some of the most compelling, enthralling pieces are instrumental fragments, from the minimalist beats and flatly strummed guitar of 'Crone Motion' to the tumbling drums, off-kilter keyboards and tinny proto-drum machine beats of 'Dream Power'. The latter sounds like Boards Of Canada covering one of the transitions on My Bloody Valentine's 'Loveless'.

Rounding off the collection is the moving instrumental 'Spirit House', driven by haunting organ arpeggios, analogue wind effects and minimal drums. Among these 36 tracks there's enough material for three great albums and, perhaps, one classic one.

So this is it, then. There's one more release to come in September, a 14-track collection of demos from 2000 to 2006, spanning three of their classic albums. Warp have made it clear that this will be the last of the unheard music of Broadcast. The most enigmatic of artists has left us with one final puzzle.

ANTHONY THORNTON

Shop Talk

Helen Anahita Wilson, aka **PLANT VOX**, guides us through her record collection

You're based in Brighton. Tell us about your favourite record store

"I've been shopping at Resident in Brighton since it first opened in 2004, and I've bought so many records there that it's impossible to count. The shop's changed quite a bit over the years and is now twice the size, which can only be a very good thing. So many record stores have come and gone in Brighton, but Resident continues to go from strength to strength."

What's your favourite way to find new music?

"It may be a bit unconventional these days, but I really like finding new music in libraries. SOAS in London has an amazing collection of records from across the globe, and I've found some really brilliant recordings from Thailand, Morocco and India there.

"I'm also lucky to be sent new music sometimes. I have a show called Stereophonica on Repeater Radio and sometimes people will send me new and interesting releases. I mostly play electronic, experimental, and global classical music on the show and I'm always looking for intriguing releases that fit the bill."

Have you ever purchased a record based on the cover art alone?

"Oh definitely! I've bought many records on the basis of a promising or interesting cover – many of them turned out to be really disappointing.

"One album I knew would be good though was Thelonious Monk's 'Monk's Music' which has him bizarrely sitting in a little orange kids' cart with a mini suitcase and some manuscript paper on the front."

What's one special album that you'd love to get your hands on?

"Impossible to say, and I'm not that interested in collecting rare records for the sake of their rarity, but there are a few things right up the top of my wish list right now. They are the Real World reissue bundle of Sheila Chandra's albums, the double LP of 'Resonance Gathering', which documents large-scale performanes of Pauline Oliveros' music, and I'd really like a copy of Annea Lockwood's 'Tiger Balm / Amazonia Dreaming / Immersion'."

Finally, talk us through your record collection

"Sadly, my vinyl collection is nowhere near as extensive as it used to be, but I've kept a core collection of electronica, jazz and South Asian music.

"I've got some really fantastic recordings from vocal artists including the Dagar Brothers and Kishori Amonkar, loads of jazz recordings that are really meaningful and special to me such as 'Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster', and old favourites from Orbital, LCD Soundsystem, Terry Riley and Éliane Radigue."

Plant Vox's 'REset' is out now on Platoon

Buried Treasure

ANNE CLARK

The Sitting Room

RED FLAME, 1982

Fittingly for an album called 'The Sitting Room', I first came across Anne Clark's debut long-player from 1982 while sitting in the living room of a friend-of-a-friend's flat in Berlin last summer. The vinyl sleeve was propped against the wall, half-hidden by a Monstera plant. The cover image spoke to me immediately. A muted reproduction of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting Beata Beatrix, it seemed to suggest both sadness and spiritual release.

As I soon found out, 'The Sitting Room' isn't exactly a summery record. It's imbued with the winsome bleakness that only a British record of a certain vintage has. As Clark intones over the funereal organ drone of 'Shades', "Through the soft shades of summer / Fused together by the strange seasons of the city / The stationery is stained with all my failures".

An English poet and singer-songwriter, Clark didn't need a lot of time to make an impact with 'The Sitting Room' – the total running length clocks in at just under 16 minutes. But with her resonant spoken word vocals and the ethereal, shadowy electronica, driven by spartan drum machines, the album leaves a persistent mark. The fleeting duration of the tracks only underscores their unassuming potency.

Like a curious dream that takes up residence in your brain and lingers for days on end, this is a masterful darkwave statement, released when Clark was just 22 years old. 'The Sitting Room' draws together strands of watery musique concrète ('Swimming'), hauntological ambient synthscapes ('An Ordinary Life'), prescient use of sampling ('Shades') and quirky synthpop ('Short Story (Party Mix!)').

The album was only the beginning for Clark, who is now regarded as an influential figure in the development of new wave and industrial music. She joined forces with David Harrow of Psychic TV for her subsequent albums 'Changing Places' (1983), 'Joined Up Writing' (1984) and 'Hopeless Cases' (1987). 'Joined Up Writing' yielded what is perhaps her best-known track, the synth classic 'Our Darkness'. She has also collaborated with John Foxx (on the 1985 album 'Pressure Points') and with Eyeless In Gaza's Martyn Bates (on 1998's 'Just After Sunset').

A visionary proponent of spoken word, Clark's output across the decades has been prolific. I'd still recommend starting with 'The Sitting Room' though, if only to discover how a record that asks so little of your time can give so much back in return.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

KEELEY FORSYTH

The Hollow

FATCAT

Melancholy beauty from North York Moors

From ominous, thunder-filled skies, through the black rain of the North York Moors, comes a voice to rattle the bones. Monastic, despairing, its meaning half-lost in a skin-chilling squall of electronic noise. "It feeds in the hollow of my mouth / The dregs now walk within me," it cries. "There is no help here / Not for me."

The title track of Keeley Forsyth's superb third album was seemingly inspired by the discovery of a long-abandoned mineshaft on a moorland walk. And this portal between air and earth, between desperate life and mouldering death, is perfectly symbolic of an album frequently overwhelmed by grief.

"A cold wind / Sweeps up the dead," sings Forsyth on 'Eve', as icy gales whip around her operatic vocals. "An air so dreary / Even the fittest body would / Lay its spirit down to die." It's a haunting tribute to the doting grandmother who raised her on a 1980s Oldham council estate.

The odd twist here? Music is Forsyth's second career, after decades as a TV actor. She was a regular in 'Peak Practice' and 'Heartbeat', and is surely the only artist in this edition of Electronic Sound to have taken part in a 'Family Fortunes' all-star special.

So it's all the more remarkable that Scott Walker's bleak 1995 opus 'Tilt', with its orchestral sweeps and baritone despair, should become the clear template for her recording career. Although admittedly, more recent stage performances as a self-created mute hermit called "The Scuttler" suggest a distinct interest in the darker corners of the human condition.

Forsyth presses these dramatic chops into affecting service on the spoken word of 'A Shift', adapting 'Women Of The Working Class', Mal Finch's 1984 tribute to the wives of striking miners, into a message of strident solidarity with fellow female creatives.

But those expecting redemption at the album's conclusion may be downhearted. The closing 'Creature', a stark piano recital from some austere moorland chapel, only reinforces the hopelessness of that goosebump-raising title track. "There is *still* no help here," reiterates Forsyth, her voice now sounding indistinct and defeated. Perhaps her fourth album will finally emerge blinking into the sunshine, but for now let's remain underground and wallow in the half-lit beauty of this stunningly lachrymose collection.

BOB FISCHER

LOW END ACTIVIST
Airdrop
PEAK OIL

Jamie Russell seems to have clearer memories of the sound systems and illegal raves of the 1980s and early 90s than most of the people who were actually there. His 2019 Low End Activist release 'Low End Activism' sourced samples from a 1988 video of the Muzikon Sound System on Oxford's Blackbird Leys estate where Russell grew up. His new album takes inspiration from the tape packs of hardcore DJs like Ratty passed around a few years later.

Naming tracks after pivotal raves – 'Airdrop 01 (Waterstock)' and 'Airdrop 05 (White Horse Hill)' – the artist dissects hardcore's synth stabs, diva vocals and bowel-bothering sub-bass then spaces them out with echoing dub-based production, to resemble reverberations around an abandoned quarry where people once partied. It's a similar concept to Lee Gamble's 'Diversions: 1994-1996', but whereas that sounded like an ambient requiem for rave's innocence, the breakbeats throughout 'Airdrop' feel like the kicks in the womb of a style currently undergoing a rebirth in the sets of innovative DJs like SHERELLE. **PC**

DJ ABSOLUTELY SHIT
Inabiteveryoneelse
RED LASER

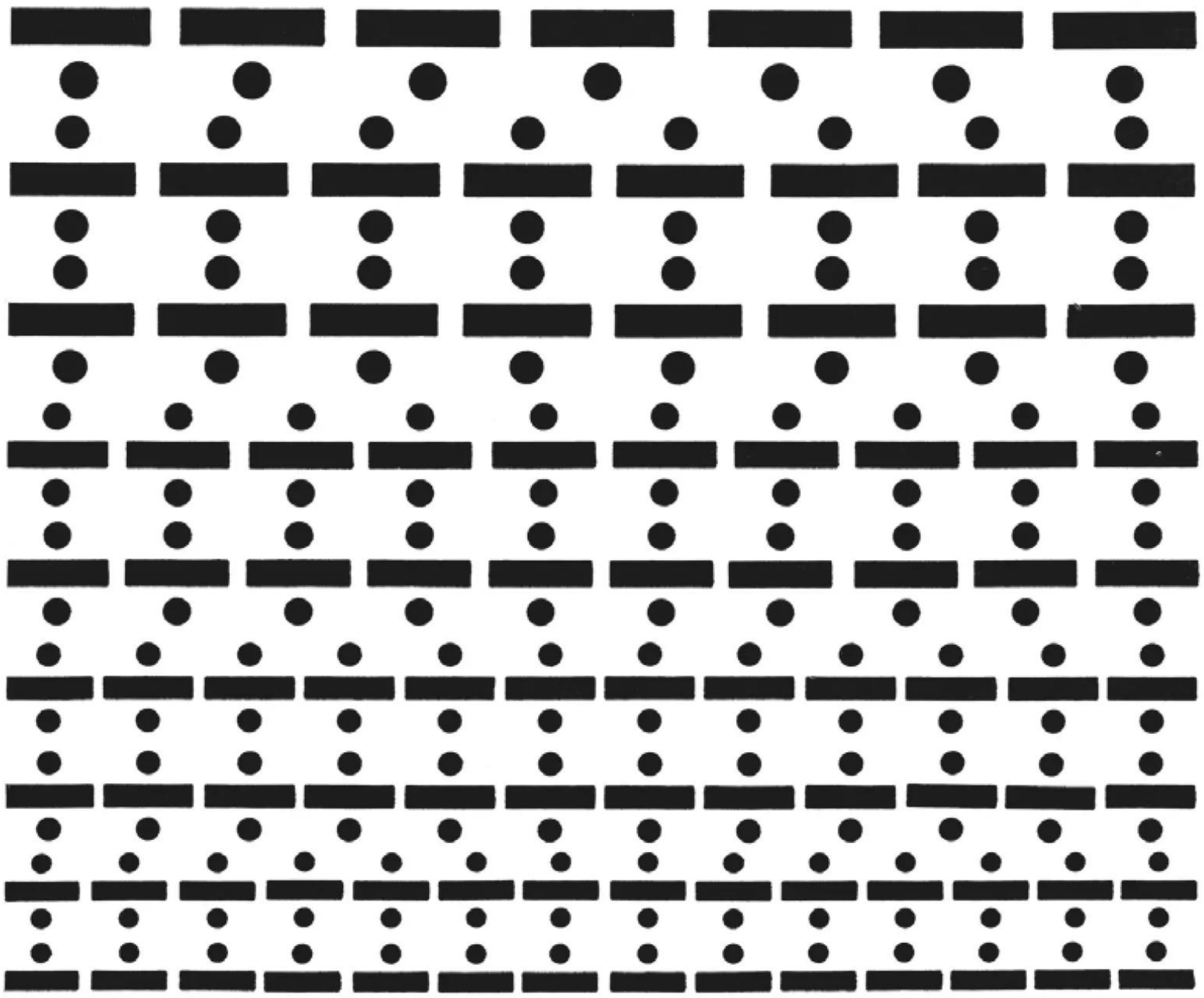
Metrodome and Il Bosco are DJ Absolutely Shit, a duo whose feverish cut 'n' paste genre fusions have become a vital part of Manchester's dance scene in recent years. Though they avoid social media, they've built a sizeable following with their addictive and unpredictable tracks, meshing hardcore rave, house, trip hop, Italo disco and jungle. On 'Inabiteveryoneelse', released on tape and vinyl samplers, they distil their singular sound further by zeroing in on what makes those tunes so powerful.

'Bridge To Your Heart' mixes a gorgeous 80s soul vocal with tumbling breakbeats, while the track 'Bolivia' takes some lyrics from a certain Staten Island rap crew and adds them to rave hoovers, ferocious drums and hypnotic synths. Elsewhere, on 'Lost In Space', astral arpeggios spiral over constantly shifting beats. These disparate sounds are threaded together by DJ Absolutely Shit in a way that makes perfect sense, investing them with major emotional heft as well as ingenious dancefloor energy. **BM**

SELF MODIFIER
Lozells Drone Survey
POLYTECHNIC YOUTH

After three years away, the mighty Polytechnic Youth label returns with this cracking Self Modifier record from Peter Duggal, the current writing partner of ex-Kraftwerker Wolfgang Flür. Duggal, who's from Birmingham, takes his home turf as inspiration here, with four long-form electronic tracks rooted in the "memories and landscape" of childhood, in the deprived Lozells and Handsworth areas of the city during the volatile Thatcher era.

According to Duggal, home computers and music provided a welcome escape from endemic rioting, police oppression and the omnipresent threat of nuclear war. 'Lozells Drone Survey' echoes that reverie of youth, as it taps into a warm nostalgia for something that is "no longer real". Immersive stuff it is too. 'Flyover Lament' is like a euphoric Kosmischer Läufer offcut, while 'Disassembler' recalls the seductive comedown bliss of FSOL's expansive 'Lifeforms'. A sense of foreboding still pervades the Kraftwerkian heft of the title track, though. Even as it entices you to the dancefloor, you can almost hear the city streets outside descending into chaos. **VI**



RNA ORGANISM
RNAO Meets POPO
MESH-KEY

RNA Organism emerged from an underground and experimental Japanese music scene which centred around Osaka's Vanity Records. The trio (known by their aliases of Zero, Chance and 0123) released just one album in 1980, and frankly, it's really fucking weird. 'Weimar 22' registers somewhere between Suicide's 'Dream Baby Dream' and what sounds like a haunted baby monitor, distant voices wobbling and chuntering beneath a lo-fi Casio click-clack.

This type of haunted disorientation continues, at times becoming totally unsettling. 'Howareyou, Whyou' bumps incoherent spectral chatter up against an eerie Bontempi beat, shuffling slowly towards the chilly muzak purgatory of 'Matrix', all of which is scattered with a sense of surreality and disorder that occasionally recalls Fluxus musicians such as Nam June Paik or Yoko Ono. These pieces sound broken, possessed, deranged – sometimes all at the same time. Crucially though, after more than 40 years, they are still curious and completely surprising. **ST**

SUN RA
Inside The Light World: Sun Ra Meets The OVC
STRUT

Purported "lost" albums too often disappoint, though Strut Records keep coming up with the goods where the Arkestra is concerned. 'Inside The Light World: Sun Ra Meets The OVC' was originally recorded in August 1986 at the Mission Control studios in Massachusetts, with the magnetic tape located and then mixed in 2016 and 2017. The bounty recovered includes some magnificent versions of much-loved Sun Ra songs like 'Love In Outer Space' and 'Calling Planet Earth', as well as the 22-minute epic 'Discipline 27-11', all with added widescreen density thanks to being recorded live in a 24-track studio.

The band would have been further inspired on the day by the OVC – not a musical collaborator, but a keyboard-triggered kaleidoscopic projector invented by rocket scientist Bill Sebastian (OVC stands for Outer Space Visual Communicator). Sebastian, who provides the sleeve notes, first encountered Sun Ra in the 1970s and became convinced his legendary jazz band were seeking the same cosmic sonic advances as he was aiming for visually. Amazingly, the Arkestra continues to gig, while Sebastian pursues VR-led iterations of the OVC to this day. **JA**

JEFF MILLS
The Trip – Enter The Black Hole
AXIS

Space is silent – something to do with vacuums, or aliens not having ears. Jeff Mills refutes this on what he describes as "the world's first cosmic opera". Following an experimental launch in Paris in 2008, this rocket-boosted 2024 version had a grand live debut in Tokyo featuring a space-suited Mills and AV experimentalists Cosmic Lab.

The music is suitably visual. Nocturnal minor chords abound, and squirming beats orbit around suspended strings, full of portent, drenched in effects. 'Hole' gives us a rare banging moment, as a dubby bass groove adds kinetic energy to art-popster Jun Togawa's spoken word musings. And 'Contradictions' feels like a boogie on a space station. But in zero gravity, the dancefloor has little use. This is black hole noir, with clouds of ambience, a nebulae of woody xylophones, discordant free jazz, even a foxy organ here and there. If it's not an opera, it's a gravity-free ballet. Spaceman Jeff is clearly having fun. **FR**

TRANSMISSION TOWERS
Transmission One
É SOUL CULTURA

Blistering debut from Merseyside mavericks

It's rare now, except in nostalgic hindsight, to hear a new band described in terms of the elusive energy of dance music's true first-wave underground. Plenty of time has elapsed since the heady, pre-digital, pre-superstar DJ days that saw places like Detroit, Chicago, New York and Manchester foment a new movement that would eventually take over the world.

But there's something about this first release on Luke Una's new É Soul Cultura label that captures an innocent vitality which might have seemed to be long-gone. And the best thing about 'Transmission One' is, rather than feeling arch or knowing in its influence-channelling, it all feels almost entirely coincidental – accidental, even. No doubt because this lot come from precisely the same maverick space once inhabited by the likes of Ten City, The Latin Rascals or Phuture.

Transmission Towers are a Liverpool duo that comprise half-Irish, half Greek-Cypriot Mark Kyriacou and half-Nigerian, half Ghanaian Eleanor Mante. They've known each other a while, but after a decade-long hiatus they reconnected over their shared desire to harness the aforementioned energy of their formative late 1980s and early 90s years. Adding a sprinkling of astral magic dust that nods to Sun Ra, Manu Dibango or Fela Kuti, the vibe here is singularly, off-the-wall intoxicating.

The opening track 'Up' certainly sets the tone. Its echoes of Tom Tom Club's off-kilter punk-funk married with strobing New York electro demand that you pay attention, before a slick segue into the silky machine-soul anthem 'Roller Skater 23'. A soaring, euphoric paean to an out-of-reach roller-skating femme fatale ("Who is that girl / She looks so free / On roller skates she glides") so perfect you could be forgiven you'd already heard the peak.

But no, all that follows satisfies equally in an unexpected, never-saw-it-coming kind of way that is pure bliss. From the downtempo celestial tenderness of 'Go Slow Heart' to the irresistible, otherworldly space-disco chug of 'Cosmic Trigger', which brilliantly sets Mante's soaring vocals against a half-speed, acid-sci-fi backdrop, we're blindsided by savvy touches at every turn.

If there is a standout, maybe it's the slurred, lopsided tribal stomp 'Everything'. Get too deep into its psychedelic, new wave voodoo-raga spell though, and it might take days for you to recover. Talk about a signal of intent.

CARL GRIFFIN

Label Profile

Label: No Type
Location: Montreal, Canada
Est: 1998

Potted History: "It's the age-old story of a bunch of friends who all made music that was somewhat on the fringes," says label founder David Turgeon. "There was Frédérick Blouin, Napalm Jazz, Kaia Wong, and in the middle was me, dabbling in lo-fi improv with Kaia – as Asyncdrone – and in electronics under my previous name Period Three.

"We had no money, but I had internet access, so I had the idea to launch a free MP3 label. No Type was a domain name I had bought with the vague intent of founding a web design company. That didn't happen, but it was quite an apt name for our genre-agnostic crew. Releasing music for free on the web was a pretty new idea in 1998, so some magazines picked it up and people from around the globe started submitting demos. Around 2000, we were part of a thriving netlabel scene. Today I'm fairly sure we're the oldest still going."

Mission Statement: "Mostly, we're releasing music by artists I appreciate and enjoy. Sometimes because of an adventurous or experimental slant, sometimes because of a strong dedication to a very specific craft. It depends. Every release is its own thing. No Type isn't a genre, but it's definitely a spirit."

Key Artists & Releases: "Among our recent releases, our biggest hit is undoubtedly Eryk Salvaggio's 'Worlding', an ambient collaboration with actual mushrooms. In the past we've had artists such as Tomas Jirku or Books On Tape who released amazing things with us and then went on to bigger labels. Our most ambitious release, which I'm quite proud of, is 'Montreal Free!', a four-CD boxset documenting the city's unsung improv scene."

Future Plans: "At this point, I'm thinking about the legacy of netlabels," says Turgeon. "Not just No Type, but the whole scene which used to thrive on the web. Just keeping our digital history online is a job in itself, and tech giants aren't exactly helping. It's scary to think that Bandcamp, nice as it is, is the only viable resource today. That's partly why I'm maintaining my own independent music server, which other netlabels such as Panospria and Latent Space are also using. This is an area that could grow in the future, though file storage is not cheap!"

Any Other Business? "What I've learned from setting up a netlabel is that since there's often no physical object to speak of, you're also setting yourself up for a lifetime of digital preservation. It means you're at the mercy of whatever platform you're using to share your music, which is perhaps more of a responsibility now than it was in 1998.

"Frankly, I'm kind of hoping for a global countercultural digital movement similar to punk, hardcore and college rock creating their own independent network of distributors, venues, zines and music stores from scratch in the 1980s. We need to find life outside of Spotify, and quickly."

For more, visit notype.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Nicole Raymond, aka **NikNak**, on the first and last albums she bought, and a go-to record

FIRST

BURIAL
Burial
HYPERDUB, 2006

"I think the first was Burial's debut album on vinyl. It's so iconic, and at that point in my life I don't think I'd heard music like that. I first heard it in college, and when I began university I was adamant I had to get it on vinyl and have it in my collection. I was going through some things at the time when I was first introduced to Burial, and his work in storytelling and textures is unmatched."

LAST

TOIRET STATUS
Otohime
ORANGE MILK, 2020

"Every so often, I'll go on a deep dive on Bandcamp and find some truly odd stuff that I love. Toiret Status is something I stumbled upon that blew my mind on the first listen. I love how textural and otherworldly this project is. The sample manipulation and warped musicality is next-level."

ALWAYS

MEITEI
Komachi
MÉTRON, 2019

"I'm basically a sponge and listen to a lot of music, and it changes from day-to-day. But as I write this, there's something about Meitei's production on this project, and in general, that is instantly calming and helps me to slow down. All of Meitei's music is very soothing and transportive, but going off of what I have on vinyl, I think this was the first album I heard of his and I immediately became a fan. I hope to experience his music live one day."

NIKNAK
Ireti
ACCIDENTAL

Visionary soundtrack from the Leeds talent

Has anyone ever created a piece of dystopian fiction which doesn't end in doom? Having googled "dystopia happy ending", I found a page suggesting that George Orwell's '1984' is one such example. I think that's pushing it a bit. But on 'Ireti', Leeds musician, producer, turntablist and Oram Award winner NikNak (Nicole Raymond) dives into Afrofuturism and shows how dystopia can become a sonic utopia.

As a relatively new name on the scene, Raymond has already collaborated with the likes of Grandmaster Flash, Princess Nokia and Madlib. Her debut album 'Bashi' was released in 2020, and she has performed at Glastonbury, Berlin's Berghain and London's Fabric club.

'Ireti' opens with 'This Pile Of Rubble Is More Human', a macerating mass of electronics and the ominous start of a narrative based around human/machine relationships. To complement such cyberpunk themes, Raymond deploys a suitably forward-facing aural mixture.

'You Were Supposed To Be Good', featuring Grifton Forbes Amos and Cassie Kinoshi, scatters warm saxophone and trumpet across blasts of chilly breaks which, on tracks such as 'Break My Bones' and 'Within Cells', begins to open out into more positive and radiant soundscapes.

However, even as the claustrophobia of Raymond's dense, post-jungle production begins to subside and exhale as it stretches out into more hopeful shapes, an uneasy tension remains just beneath the surface.

On 'Burning Bright', rays of beatific light are undercut with anxious machine skitter, a subtle electronic presence which suggests the harmony between warm melodic humanity and cold metallic machinery is not purely about hedonistic bliss, but something more functional and progressive.

On the closing track 'You've Never Seen A Miracle', with Chisara Agor and Cassie Kinoshi, Agor's vocals shine through the glistening rumble of rainfall, like the fleeting moments of beauty recounted in Roy Batty's final 'Blade Runner' monologue.

It's not so much that 'Ireti' provides an overtly happy ending. Rather, it imagines a kind of hopeful pragmatism for humanity, a new scope of diversity which spans not only all people and races, but the intelligent, sentient technologies with which humanity has now integrated.

In this conclusion, where others might find doom, Raymond's eclectic influences and shimmering futuristic textures posit a utopia of co-operation, equality and, ultimately, beauty.

SPENSER TOMSON

THE BALLOONIST
A Quiet Day
WAYSIDE & WOODLAND

Memories of chickenpox have never felt so seductive. The Balloonist was intended as a one-off project for Epic45 frontman Ben Holton, with 2022's sublime debut album a floating, 'Mr Benn'-inspired joyride above semi-mythical Arcadian countryside. Here, Holton comes softly back to earth. The opening track 'Midweek Rain' – all groggy synths and soft pattering on the window – is the perfect introduction to an album with one Start-Rite shoe planted firmly in the listless ennui of the school holidays, the other in the sallow jumble of assorted youthful maladies.

It's an elegantly touching collection, an immaculate evocation of the sheer stillness of a pre-digital childhood. The noodling guitars of 'Pebble Mill At One' are an affectionate homage to BBC One's lunchtime magazine show for pensioners, the jazzy strums of 'Afternoon Ceefax' an endearing throwback to the delights of reading teletext weather forecasts with a temperature. Holton's melodies are effortlessly poignant, hovering like motes of dust floating behind the kitchen curtains in pale, February sunshine. Simply exquisite. **BF**

DIE PARTEI
Celaviemachinery
BUREAU B

Die Partei were formed in 1981 as a short-lived synthpop duo by The Wirtschaftswunder's guitarist Tom Dokoupil and legendary art theorist Joseph Beuys' star pupil, Walter Dahn. The pair recorded 'La Freiheit Des Geistes' together over the course of a weekend, leaving a great deal creatively to improvisation and chance. Despite self-imposed limitations, they managed to usher in a landmark of the Neue Deutsche Welle, a surprisingly supple and subtle instrumental album with interjections of impalpable recorded voices and distinctive moments of humour.

Reissued by Bureau B in 2014, 'La Freiheit Des Geistes' was assumed to be the final word. But Dokoupil and Dahn recently joined a select gang that includes Fanny, Shirley Collins and Shuggie Otis, by making a record more than four decades after their last one. 'Celaviemachinery', if not quite the landmark its predecessor was, is a charming undertaking made with similar analogue equipment to that used in the early 80s. The repetitive motif on 'Here Come The Warm Jets' is a little too warm, becoming annoying by its conclusion, but all the same it's a hypnotic testament to the lasting power of chemistry. **JA**

SONS OF KEN
We Are The Kens
BANDCAMP

They may sound like the cultural offspring of the Barbie franchise, but the disco-electronica duo Michael Moran and Spike Burridge are literally both sons of men called Ken. So don't come to this album expecting six-packs, fixed grins and perfect bleached hair. Instead, what you get is a former member of Colourbox and a Disney sound mixer wearing their dancefloor influences with a superfan's pride.

Like Parliament jamming with Fatboy Slim, or Daft Punk reimagining Space, 'We Are The Kens' takes you on a rollercoaster of fat beats, funk grooves and acid disco domination. Yes, it's a bit "big-beat-meets-French-touch" 90s revival, but it has enough of its own identity to avoid simple pastiche. Check the supercharged swing of electro-soul jams 'Whistling In The Park' and 'What's He Doing In There?', while 'Sha-Boop' is so slathered in infectious 80s electro-funk sauce that it's begging for a Janet Jackson vocal. **MJ**

YU CHING
The Crystal Hum
NIGHT SCHOOL

Minimal instrumentation, maximal reverb. If that sounds less like a description and more like a manifesto, it's because Taiwan's Yu Ching boasts a singular vision. On 'The Crystal Hum', which was recorded in Berlin, she explores its potential across 10 tracks that seep into the imagination and hook you in. Putting to one side her day job (as one half of Aemong with Brazilian artist Henrique Uba) has given her the opportunity to create a debut that sounds like mysterious radio transmissions caught on an 80s transistor.

From the staccato chords, immutable click-click rhythm and smokey vocals of 'Fly! Little Black Thing' to the minimal bassline of 'The Song Of Summer' (think The Normal re-imagined by 'Pornography'-era Cure), 'The Crystal Hum' is a beguiling jewel of an album. Ironically, in using a restricted palette of sounds (otherworldly Casio keyboards, treated guitars, 80s drum machines), topped with sensual vocals sung in English and Mandarin, Yu Ching creates a rich multilayered world that wallows in all its nocturnal splendour. If David Lynch was running a club in the world of 'Blade Runner', this would be the sound of the house band. **AT**

BARRY ADAMSON
Cut To Black
BARRY ADAMSON INC

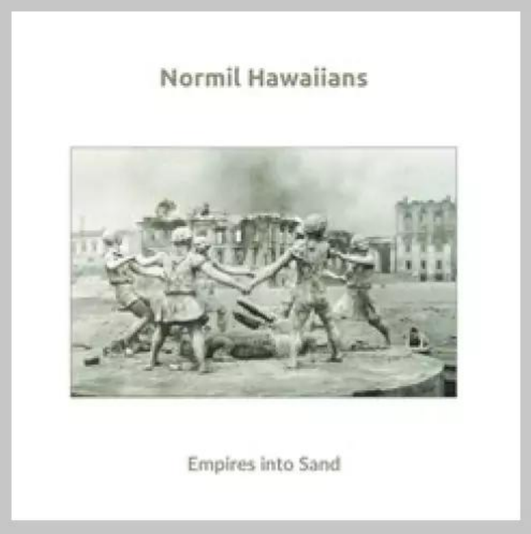
Observing Barry Adamson's musical mutability has been a joy to behold. From post-punk with Magazine, to new romantic with Visage, playing bass in Nick Cave's Bad Seeds, making faux and actual soundtracks, then settling into a career second-half as a purveyor of cinematic soul. And now, with 'Cut To Black', Adamson has assuredly made his finest statement to date.

Draped in big, luscious arrangements of 1970s vintage that frame a voice so treacly-rich it should come with a government health warning, tracks like the urgent 'Manhattan Satin' or the soul-rock of 'The Last Words Of Sam Cooke' have a casual, joyful swagger and a decisive directness. The string-soaked title track has a thwarted euphoria, its references to a burning Hollywood creating an apocalyptic gravity. Elsewhere, 'Please Don't Call On Me' is Adamson at his wry best, full of intrepid wordplay and sparse, noir, bluesy authenticity. A vital new chapter in Adamson's ongoing "Moss Side story". **MS**

ABUL MOGARD & RAFAEL ANTON IRISARRI
Impossibly Distant, Impossibly Close
BLACK KNOLL EDITIONS

The genesis of this incredibly deep and immersive long-player began with a live performance at Madrid's renowned Conde Duque Cultural Centre in 2023. This was where the complementary talents of heavyweight ambient sound sculptor Abul Mogard (still the ex-Belgrade foundry worker of lore, even to those of us who now know better) and US experimentalist Rafael Anton Irisarri first came together.

The complexity of the pair's interplay at that performance was met with a rapturous reception, so they continued to collaborate and experiment from their respective studios in Rome and New York, eventually giving rise to the two extended pieces that form 'Impossibly Distant, Impossibly Close'. 'Place Of Forever' sees Mogard conjure infinite vistas that capture the elemental. A sonic ice storm forming in brooding half-darkness, over a deep ocean swell incrementally building to a cataclysm. 'Waking Up Dizzy On A Bastion' though, balances Mogard's majestically engulfing modular synth lines with the febrile beauty of Irissari's bowed guitar loops, which as the piece progresses meld with miasmic beauty. Outstanding. **CG**



NORMIL HAWAIIANS

Empires Into Sand

UPSET THE RHYTHM

First new work in 40 years is worth the wait

Of all the post-punk groups of their era, Normil Hawaiians were perhaps the most esoteric and lightly dismissed. This collective of musicians which formed in London in 1979 has neither been lionised in print (Simon Reynolds didn't even mention them in his acclaimed history of that era, 'Rip It Up And Start Again'), nor namechecked as a significant influence on their peers and successors.

They have yet to undertake a lucrative reunion tour, and they have never given much indication that they might return – until now, with this, their first album in four decades. And it's one that more than justifies their comeback, full of invention and wonder that sounds unlike anything else you're likely to hear this year.

Recorded in 2023 at an isolated farmhouse on the Kintyre peninsula in Scotland's Hebrides, it opens with recordings of refugees retelling their stories amid a mystic, almost religious mien. 'Empires Into Sand' reprises one of their old themes – the reckoning with the legacy of colonialism – but rather than the darkness that often enveloped their work, there is something of a new airiness.

'Waterfalls: Bedford 330' exhales with a sense of freedom and love of the open road, and it's impossible not to be moved when they sing, "We stand together / Though we are on distant shores", on the wistful 'We Stand Together'. More than ever, they seem to be probing the folk roots of their music.

There is nothing too obvious here. It's left to the listener to join the dots between the themes and this ancient yet modern music, excavating a deeper kind of British soul that remains lurking beneath our soil.

The closing track 'North Atlantic' has this in abundance as it opens to birdsong, with a beautiful string figure weaving around the vocals . It ends with a sample of a Second World War fighter plane which then dissolves into what sounds like a 1960s guitar group recorded on a decaying cassette tape.

Like so much else here it leaves you thinking long after the music has ended. Here's hoping there's more to come from this sorely underrated group.

WILL SIMPSON

WAVE ARISING

(The) Rooted Sky

RANSOM NOTE

Debut collab reimagines the free rave

"Sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats." That was the infamous terminology used in the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act to describe the music at the free raves the government clamped down on after thousands of people danced on Castlemorton Common in 1992. Castlemorton made both the headlines and the notorious reputation of the Spiral Tribe sound system, who had their rig impounded and 13 members arrested as they left the party.

Thirty years after the Criminal Justice Act and the collapse of the case against Spiral Tribe, such legalese is now even more laughably inadequate to describe the music being made by one of the core members. The punishing techno of Sebastian Vaughan's DJ sets at Spiral Tribe's subsequent free "teknivals" in Europe and his 69db productions might have just about fit the bill. But if the Scottish artist's new project Wave Arising is "predominantly characterised" by anything, it's space, psychedelia and sonic experimentation.

Wave Arising is a collaboration between Vaughan and dancer/videographer Kynsie. Together they have been staging events of therapeutic practices since 2015, where participants move around a circular space to the mysterious sounds on this debut album.

Inspired more by the loose rhythms of Kynsie's Ivorian and Réunionnese heritage than the relentless hardcore of Spiral Tribe, 'It Comes And Goes' and 'Music Without Chains' use percussion-like mantras in meditation. A way of accessing the invisible life force called Qi, which they also seek to give musical form in the resonant electronic pulses of 'Golden Black' or the Steve Reich-style minimalism of 'Ronde Cinétique'.

Talk of "healing" and "inner energies" might seem to align with the current new age vogue – Spiral Tribe were once demonised as "new age travellers", after all. True, there are traces of new age sounds – the susurrant flute in the ambient 'Subconscience' and the low rumble that could be a didgeridoo in 'Soul Whispers' – but Wave Arising are worlds apart from the new age music being increasingly co-opted into wellbeing apps and corporate training courses designed to make you a compliant consumer and more productive working drone.

Abstract and often challenging, '(The) Rooted Sky' shows that reaching higher states of consciousness means stepping off the beaten path.

PAUL CLARKE

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
IMOGEN BEBB,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
VELIMIR ILIC,
MARTIN JAMES,
BEN MURPHY,
FAT ROLAND,
WILL SIMPSON,
MAT SMITH,
ANTHONY THORNTON,
SPENSER TOMSON,
BEN WILLMOTT

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Normil Hawaiians' **Guy Smith** (vocals), **Simon Marchant** (guitar) and **Noel Blanden** (drums) take on our quick-fire questions

INTERVIEW: NEIL MASON

Your 1980 debut single, 'The Beat Goes On', was great. The definitive version being the Peel Session – tell us about that day
Guy: "It was amazing. I went round to see my mum and she said, 'Oh, John Peel just phoned, he'd like you to ring him back'. He said The Beat had pulled out and could we record a session for him that night. This was about 2pm. It was all a bit of a whirlwind, which was a benefit because it was so spontaneous and I think that comes across. We had four hours to do four songs!"

You were tagged as a post-punk band, but experimentation was important to you
Guy: "Experimentation was definitely important and it was a conscious effort to break away from the punk genre. Although the songs were largely improvised, the early stuff does sound punky, but we thought we were breaking away from it."

Why was your cult classic debut album, 1982's 'More Wealth Than Money', never properly released in the UK at the time?
Noel: "Our label, Illuminated, were good with us and seemed to be in a good place, but we found out years later that they were struggling financially and their releases were boycotted by UK distributors. Mind you, we probably didn't help because we spent an awful lot of their money recording our albums."

In 2015 you reunited for the release of your "lost" 1985 album, 'Return Of The Ranters'. Who lost it?
Noel: "We ran into financial problems, again. Illuminated finally went bust and there were a lot of unpaid bills. Eventually, through the intervention of Chris Tipton and Upset The Rhythm, the record finally surfaced in 2015."

Albums not getting released, lost albums… you weren't the luckiest?
Noel: "We just weren't interested in the business side of things. We were far more concerned with the creative process, but then you leave yourself open to these unfortunate situations because you lose control of things."

'Empires Into Sand' is your first new album in 40 years. What have you all been up to?
Noel: "After our third album didn't get released, we all moved to different parts of the UK – Wales, Scotland, Kent, the South Downs. Guy joined the circus as a juggler, Simon moved into music research and lecturing, Wilf [Alun Williams] became a teacher and a flute-maker. I moved to Margate and got involved with the local scene there. We never split up and kept in touch, but we all wanted to diversify and that just went on a bit longer than any of us planned!"

Has the line-up always been a little fluid?
Noel: "We're a six-piece now after our dear friend Mark [Tyler] passed away at the end of 2022, but we've always been open to collaboration and incorporating new people, with Jimmy [Miller] and Zinta [Egle] coming on board since the early days."
Simon: "There's been a stable core of Guy, Wilf, Noel and myself since the second album. Mark and Jimmy both had involvement at different points in the past and contributed to the writing of the new material with Zinta also taking on some key singing roles."

Your new album was recorded on the West Coast of Scotland at a remote spot overlooking the sea. Tell me more
Noel: "We felt that would enable us to focus on ourselves and our music without distraction from the hubbub of daily life. We recorded the wind and waves there to use on the album, and 'Ghosts Of Ballachroy' was inspired by historical events a few miles from where we were staying."

It has echoes of the recording of the first album in a remote studio in the Welsh hills
Noel: "That's exactly right. That process of removing ourselves is very important to us."

I recall there was a story of some UFO sightings during your time there?
Noel: "There might have been an element of psychedelics and mushrooms involved, but the sheep in the fields did start marching in time to the music when we were listening to the playback!"

Any strange goings-on in Scotland?
Noel: "We committed to being as environmentally friendly as possible and stayed in a place that relied on collecting and purifying rainwater. Unfortunately, we experienced something of a drought and ran out of water after three days. We definitely got to recognise each other by scent. We like to suffer for our art."

There are many beautiful moments on the new album. 'We Stand Together' is particularly glorious
Guy: "Thanks. I was travelling through Costa Rica with my son a few years ago, and we stayed at this wonderful place on the Caribbean coast. I would stand by the sea and remembered my wife saying how when she was at college years previously she would go to the sea shore to feel connected to friends and family… 'We stand together / Though we are on distant shores'."

The track 'Exiles' features Zinta's father talking about fleeing his home in Latvia during the Soviet occupation in 1942 and a refugee talking about leaving Syria in 2014. It's pretty chilling, isn't it?
Guy: "It is chilling. Ceasefire in Palestine now!"

The world hasn't changed much, not just in the 40 years between album releases, but in the 80 years since the last World War. Have we learned nothing?
Noel: "It is sad that we don't seem to learn from the mistakes of the past. Persecution still happens, despite numerous examples in history where people have suffered. It carries on, doesn't it?"
Simon: "It's the same old things that drive it. Until we have genuinely global common wealth it will keep happening."
Guy: "Greed and ignorance are still prevalent."

That's a bit of a glum way to end. Can you tell us a joke to finish on?
Guy: "Liz Truss."

'Empires Into Sand' is out now on Upset The Rhythm

New Product

CHORD

Chord Electronics Ltd.

PROFESSIONAL

Alto

Pro headphone/nearfield monitor amplifier

Made in the UNITED KINGDOM established 1989

Introducing our world-renowned proprietary ULTIMA amplification technology to professionals everywhere.

Find out more: www.chordelectronics.co.uk/professional | @chordelectronicspro